날 닮은 아이

Information

Table of Contents URL: https://darkstartranslations.com/manga/a-child-who-looks-like-me/

Your child is born. You don’t know your child… … .’
A man who lost his memory of the woman he loved before the marriage proposal, Jung Ji-heon. A woman, Jeong-oh Lee, who she had no choice but to think to him that she had broken up. The two meet again after 7 years. And again, the man’s hot obsession.
“You have to put it aside. I will never let you go.”
Instinct is more accurate than memory, but he doesn’t know yet. She knew he had a pretty child who looked half and half of hers.

Ch1 - A Child Like Me

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1.I have something to say

“You just have to say one thing.”

In the suffocating silence, he opened his mouth.

“That child is my child.”

His heavy voice resonated painfully in her chest.

It felt like a helpless sigh was about to escape, but Jeong Oh kept her mouth tightly shut.

Was he certain, or was he just wanting to believe it? She couldn’t tell what was in his heart.

Her heart, which had always raced towards him, now ached. As she focused her eyes, they grew hot with unshed tears.

“Yena is my daughter.”

Jeong Oh noticed that his gaze, fixed on her, trembled faintly. His voice was filled with desperation and longing.

“Say she’s our daughter.”

When she didn’t answer, he repeated the words with urgency.

It was unclear what emotions he was suppressing deep inside, but even in his hushed tone, his voice rose and fell with intensity.

They all spoke the same words.

As if there was only one answer. As if she must never deny it.

If you just answer me, I will give you everything.

What he didn’t say seemed to fill the air, rubbing against her heart.

She was the one who had endured this, so why was his face contorted?

Jeong Oh gently caressed his cheek. Without realizing it, her hand had moved upward.

But his expression didn’t improve. No, he seemed even angrier.

“Say it.”

He grasped the hand that was tickling his cheek and urged her in a louder voice.

“Say it. Please.”

Who had driven this man mad?

Who had made him so desperate?

Whether the truth or a lie, it seemed he no longer cared.

She had to open her mouth for him.

Her eyes, weighing the gravity of her response, wandered like a lost child.

His desire to have her completely for himself might have led him to a wrong judgment. It could be a dangerous impulse to abandon everything just to hold onto her.

But in truth, she longed for it too.

At twenty-three, she had now turned thirty.

Seven whole years. She wanted this pain to end.

She wanted to be someone who didn’t lie to herself and her daughter.

“Yeah. She’s your child.”

Though she spoke calmly, her voice trailed off.

Uncontrollable emotions broke through, clouding her vision.

“Our… our child.”

She stuttered through the truth.

The truth he wanted.

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Jung Oh, 23 years old.

Something unimaginable happened to her.

Her hand trembled as she held the pregnancy test.

“This can’t be happening.”

It wasn’t faint, blurred lines; it was two distinct lines, as if drawn with a marker.

Outside, the day was sunny, but it felt like a storm was raging inside her home.

Something truly impossible was happening.

“This can’t be true…”

Her voice trembled with tears.

“This can’t happen…”

She had only been slightly concerned that ‘that day’ was late. Just a bit of nausea and increased drowsiness had seemed strange.

To settle her uneasy stomach, she impulsively bought a test at the pharmacy.

When she paid and left the pharmacy, she thought it was just unnecessary worry.

After seeing the result, Jeong Oh found herself groaning in despair and went out again.

She headed to another pharmacy and emptied her wallet to buy three more tests.

“Please, let that last one have been defective!”

But her wishes went unfulfilled. All the tests showed the same result.

Jeong Oh pulled at her hair. She wanted to cry.

She had no idea that she’d been drinking just a couple of days ago!

“No! That’s not the problem right now!”

It felt like her insides were splitting in two, arguing with each other.

Stay calm. I need to stay calm.

Jeong Oh took a slow, deep breath, placing her hand gently on her chest.

They had dated for six months. Both she and he were each other’s first love. Actually, she didn’t really know much about him.

Jeong Ji-heon, twenty-six years old. A senior in the business department at K University. He was about to graduate and was supposed to start working.

He hadn’t decided which company he would join yet. His father owned a snack factory. That was about all she knew about him.

Jeong Oh first met him one day while she was in Australia on a working holiday, starving for two days and crying in front of a Korean market. He lent her 20 dollars because she didn’t have money for food. That was how they began to keep in touch and met again after she returned to Korea.

Jeong Oh absolutely trusted him, knowing well that he was a good man. Even if he hesitated to talk about family, she believed there must be a reason for it.

“My dad doesn’t come home often. In 26 years, I can count on one hand how many times I’ve faced him.”

Thinking back, he had said something like that before. Perhaps that was why. After realizing that he, like her, had his own deficiencies, Jeong Oh stopped asking him about his past.

Still, there were no problems in their relationship. Their love was in the present tense, and it was happy.

The past six months had been filled with happiness. There was no room for anything else.

He didn’t express his feelings much with words, but other than that, he was an incredible man. He was handsome, kind, polite, considerate… She could attach every good description to him.

He was also very diligent about contraception. As far as Jeong Oh knew, that was true.

‘…Wasn’t it?’

She felt lost.

Jeong Oh recalled the way he had looked at her, his eyes burning as if trying to bind her. Every time the day approached, it always turned out the way he wanted.

Had all his passion been safe? Was he perfect?

“Then what is this result supposed to mean?”

She wanted to deny the result. But if she denied it, it meant something else was wrong with her body. If it was something other than pregnancy, that would be a big deal too.

‘First, I should go to the hospital. I’ll get it checked accurately, and then I’ll tell oppa.’

But do I have to go alone? I’m scared.

If I say I’m here to check if I’m pregnant without being married, won’t everyone look at me strangely?

How much will the hospital fee be? I’m a student, I don’t have any money.

“Ahhh… what do I do?”

Jeong Oh flopped down on her desk.

What should I say to oppa?

If I ask him to go to the hospital with me, will he come?

What if he gets angry and says, “How could this happen?”

“No, why would he get angry! It’s your mistake! Oppa, it’s your fault!”

Suddenly sitting up straight, Jeong Oh pointed an accusatory finger at the absent oppa.

She hadn’t even told him yet, and he hadn’t gotten angry. Worrying about something that hadn’t happened yet was her long-standing habit.

What should I do going forward? I’m only twenty-three.

“What time is it? Ah!”

Amid her anguish, the time for their appointment was fast approaching. Jeong Oh hurriedly got dressed and left the house again.

The appointment was at 5 PM.

It was an awkward distance to take a taxi to the subway station. She didn't want to run either. For some reason, she felt like she should take it easy.

Still, she walked quickly and arrived at the subway station at 5:10.

She saw Ji-heon standing blankly in front of the station. Even from a distance, he was easy to recognize. His extraordinary physique made her think he could be a model, subtly attracting the attention of those around him.

That's my boyfriend!

Honestly, his looks were impressive to the point of being burdensome. There were times when holding hands while walking on the street made her feel the intense stares of onlookers. It didn't make her feel small, but sometimes, in a joking manner, she would tease him, saying that he was prettier than her. Would it be too much to ask him to be a little less pretty?

He would respond without changing his expression.

"What are you talking about? You're way prettier."

As if comparing herself to him was even remotely fair.

She knew he wasn't just saying nice things to please others; it was pure, 100% sincerity.

Feeling both worried and happy because it seemed like he was under some kind of spell, Jeong Oh smiled. It's instinctual to want to look pretty for someone you love.

Jeong Oh's steps slowed as she spotted Ji-heon. As soon as Ji-heon noticed her, he moved toward her.

“Sorry. Did you wait long?”

As Ji-heon approached, Jeong Oh asked him, but he didn’t answer her question. Instead, he quickly buttoned up his coat.

“Why are you dressed like that?”

Without hesitation, he took off his coat and draped it over her shoulders.

The shock of the pregnancy test had made her forget to dress warmly. It was only then that Jeong Oh realized she was wearing a light autumn coat.

With swift movements, Ji-heon slipped her arms into the coat’s sleeves.

His shirt tightened around his broad shoulders and firm chest.

“I have my own style, you know.”

As he dressed her like a snowman in his clothes, Jeong Oh whined a bit. No matter what, Ji-heon continued to fasten the buttons.

Normally, she might have stubbornly refused, but today, for some reason, she wanted to feel warm.

Wearing a coat that was too big for her, she looked as if she had wrapped herself in a blanket. Seeing her like that seemed to satisfy him, as he subtly smiled.

“What is this?”

“You look good in it.”

Though it seemed like he was teasing her, Jeong Oh couldn’t complain any further. When he smiled with an appearance reminiscent of a high school first love, she couldn’t find the words.

But she still needed to say something.

“Shall we go eat?”

“Ah, no!”

Jeong Oh slightly panicked and shook her head at Ji-heon’s first question. The sight of food in front of her made her stomach churn. Seeing the two lines on the test made it feel even heavier.

“You’re not eating?”

“Yeah.”

The smile that had melted her heart faded. Ji-heon furrowed his brows, examining her condition.

Seeing her reject the food she loved clearly indicated something was wrong with her, and his face showed his conclusion.

A large hand, almost covering her entire face, came closer and gently pressed against her forehead.

Judging by her body, which was warm even against the cold early winter wind, Ji-heon immediately changed his plan.

“Let’s go. I’ll take you home.”

He had concluded that she was unwell.

Ji-heon’s fingers interlocked firmly with Jeong Oh’s slender fingers. As their hands touched, they gradually absorbed each other’s warmth.

The comforting sensation of being filled with his warmth began to wash away Jeong Oh’s anxiety.

In the densely packed one-room village, the sun set as they walked home. When they reached her house, Ji-heon let go of her hand.

“Go inside quickly.”

“I’ll go in and come back out.”

“No, you look tired. Hurry and go rest.”

“No! I’m not tired at all. I feel great!”

With her face flushed, Jeong Oh raised her voice, denying her condition.

“I need to go inside because I have something to do.”

He smiled warmly but made another excuse.

“What’s going on?”

“Hey! Jeong Oh!”

The moment she threw the question at him, a guy from a distance called Jeong Oh’s name.

“Sunbae!”

Turning her head, Jeong Oh responded to the man, a senior from her department who lived nearby.

Ji-heon frowned and turned to look as well.

Ji-heon, standing next to Jeong Oh, became invisible as the approaching man ruffled Jeong Oh’s hair.

“Hey, how come you’ve been MIA for almost a month?”

With the man’s annoying behavior, Ji-heon raised his hand. Luckily, the man withdrew his hand before Ji-heon could intervene.

“Been busy?”

“Yeah. I’ve been a bit busy.”

“Busy dating?”

The man teased Jeong Oh lightly. As Ji-heon’s eyes hardened, Jeong Oh felt embarrassed. While she was biting her lip, the man finally noticed Ji-heon’s fierce gaze and quickly stepped back.

“Enjoy your date, and let’s grab a meal sometime later.”

The man nodded at Ji-heon and immediately left.

After the man left, the air became awkward for a moment. Feeling like she needed to explain, Jeong Oh cautiously opened her mouth.

“He’s a senior from my department who lives nearby.”

“Let’s go up.”

He changed his mind again. Just a moment ago, he had said he would just leave. Then he claimed he had something to do.

Even though Jeong Oh wanted to talk quietly with him, she nodded in agreement.

But for some reason, her steps up the stairs felt heavy.

The weighty footsteps following her made her feel as if they were about to engulf her, and Jeong Oh moved slowly.

Eventually, they reached the third floor.

Jeong Oh’s slender fingers unlocked the door, and with a quiet click, the front door opened.

In a cozy space of about four pyeong, it felt like a storm had hit multiple times today.

Without fail, Ji-heon hugged her shoulders from behind.

Even though she knew a storm was coming, Jeong Oh couldn’t help but let out a small gasp.

“I’m cold.”

“……”

“I’ll warm you up.”

As he unbuttoned the coat I had put on, he leaned in close and whispered softly, as if he might nibble my ear. His breath soon traveled to my nape.

When the thick coat I had worn slipped to the floor, he turned my body toward him.

I felt my mind go hazy, captivated by the intensity of his gaze that seemed to erase all my thoughts.

As I moved my head, his sharp jawline became prominent.

The dim light created sharp shadows that imprinted on my eyes. It hurt to look at him.

I tried to step back and create some distance, but he quickly filled the gap. My feet slipped, and before I knew it, I found myself sitting on the bed. It seemed I had inadvertently led him to the bed.

He filled my vision, his face wearing a faint smile as he leaned down toward me.

A determined breath flowed smoothly into my mouth. It was gentle in pace but not devoid of heat. The warmth of his breath made my eyes water, and I lowered my eyelids. Just holding onto my racing heart felt overwhelming.

Neither my body, gaze, nor voice could escape him.

I always fell for him, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

What should I do?

Still, I had to say something.

“W-wait…”

I couldn’t overpower him physically. I had never tried to.

“Wait…”

Just as I barely escaped his kiss, I spoke again. My breath, heavy with heat, burst forth in a soft voice.

His eyebrows slightly furrowed as I momentarily halted my attempt.

My wet lips glistened, and his gaze was fixed there.

As if urging me to speak.

I licked my heated lips and slowly voiced my thoughts.

“I… I have something to tell you.”

My heart raced for a different reason now.

What expression will you have now?

Ch2 - I Held Back the Words “I Love You”

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I have to say it. I need to say it.

Yet, the words just wouldn’t come out, and I could only bite my lips.

“You said you had something to say. Go on.”

Seeing me hesitate, Jiheon urged me on, his eyes still filled with an unsettled yearning.

His gaze was burning with a desire that was impossible to suppress, as if he was determined to fulfill his wants after hearing my ‘something to say.’

Like a mermaid who had lost her voice, I fumbled several times before finally blurting out something completely unrelated.

“…I’m hungry.”

“…”

It was an unexpected statement, but it definitely had an effect.

His intense gaze, which seemed to bind me, loosened.

You said you weren’t going to eat. Did your mind change? Right now?

I sensed a hint of rebellion in my heart at his questioning gaze, so I added a few more words.

“I said I’m hungry. Hungry. Hungry.”

“…Huh. I wondered why you were skipping a meal.”

In the end, Jiheon surrendered to my insistence and got up from his seat.

“Alright. Let’s eat. What should I make?”

As he opened the refrigerator, I rushed over to look inside. I thought I could bear the smell well enough for now. Kimchi pancakes with dongchimi broth would be perfect.

“Kimchi pancakes.”

“Got it. Just sit tight.”

Without hesitation, Jiheon rolled up his sleeves. Although it was my place, he was quite familiar with my kitchen, and it was almost like his own.

Kimchi pancakes weren’t difficult for him to make. Jiheon quickly prepared the batter and poured a ladleful into a frying pan coated with oil.

The sizzling sound of the batter hitting the hot oil made my mouth water. The queasiness I felt earlier seemed like a lie as I started to feel hungry.

After checking that the bottom of the batter was evenly cooked, Jiheon lifted the handle of the frying pan. With a flick of his wrist, he flipped the pancake. In the blink of an eye, the golden-brown side faced up.

“Wow. It’s amazing every time I see it.”

I marveled at his magical skills. As if in response to my praise, he flipped it again, and another round of awe escaped my lips.

A daily life filled with happiness, even more so than fulfilling desires. That said, the desires wouldn’t just vanish.

The two of us sat across from each other at a small table, enjoying the kimchi pancakes with dongchimi. It was a dish that was as delicious as it

looked.

While watching me happily munch away, Jiheon reached out to touch my forehead again.

“How are you feeling now?”

“Yeah… I’m okay. I was fine from the start.”

As my appetite returned, I felt a bit stronger.

I thought I could manage going to the hospital by myself.

Let’s talk when things become clear. That’s okay.

“I should get going now.”

Not long after finishing our meal, Jiheon stood up.

“Already?”

“Yeah. I have something to do.”

His mention of having something to do wasn’t just an excuse.

Whether our time together was short or long, parting with him was always a bit sad. But I couldn’t hold onto him for too long.

I stood up alongside him and grabbed his coat. While he wasn’t looking, I secretly slipped a tangerine into the pocket.

As I handed it to him…

“Here’s your coat. Thanks…”

“What’s this?”

My words of gratitude never got to finish. In his hand was the pregnancy test.

I thought I had hidden it carefully in the desk drawer, but I hadn’t managed to conceal one out of four.

I hurriedly snatched the test from Jiheon’s hand and stuffed it back into the drawer.

But alas, that was a bigger mistake.

Jiheon opened the drawer again.

He found three more pregnancy tests similar to the one he had discovered.

I was going to talk about it after going to the hospital, but he found out first.

I couldn’t read any emotions from his expression. His sharp gaze made me feel dizzy.

“What is this?”

Jiheon asked again. But there was no need for me to respond any further.

Four pregnancy tests, and my pale face. My reaction was the most definitive answer.

Jiheon’s eyebrows tightened in disbelief.

Just then, his phone vibrated. After glancing at the name on the screen, Jiheon let out a short sigh and looked back at me.

Taking a step closer, I flinched and took half a step back. He moved closer, wrapping his arms around me.

“Don’t worry. Just rest for now.”

“…”

“We’ll talk tomorrow, okay?”

Patting my back, his soft words felt like a blanket wrapping around my shoulders. Yet, I couldn’t shake off the anxious feeling. It felt like I would have to pull away that blanket as soon as he left.

The parting time wasn’t long. After receiving his coat from me, Jiheon left right away. Even his words not to come out felt somewhat disappointing to me.

After he left, all kinds of worries spiraled one after the other.

What if he starts to doubt me?

What will happen to us moving forward? What will happen to me?

What if he says he wants to break up?

Even though sleepiness washed over me, I couldn’t fall asleep. The day felt endlessly long, even after the sun had set.

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I received a message from him around 11 PM.

Startled awake by the vibration, I checked the name on the screen and immediately answered the call.

“Hello.”

[Were you sleeping? Sorry.] “Um, no. It’s fine.”

I replied while clearing my hoarse throat, but my lips felt dry instantly.

[You left a tangerine in your pocket.] He brought up the tangerine first.

Before we parted, I had slipped a tangerine into the pocket of Jiheon’s coat. It was one of the little pranks I occasionally pulled. Sometimes I would put in chocolate or candy.

“Yeah. I told you to eat it on your way.”

[It was good. I enjoyed it.] “Uh-huh….”

It was the usual trivial conversation, but it wasn’t the topic I was waiting for, so I responded listlessly.

His voice added weight to my worries again.

[Jeong-oh, let’s go to the hospital together.] “…Huh?”

My heart sank. Why is he suggesting we go to the hospital together? What does he want to do there?

[We need to get the maternity handbook.] “…….”

[I looked it up, and it said you get one after checking in.] My tension melted away, and tears welled up in my eyes.

I had been careful about contraception; how could this happen? Was there another man involved?

If I were to have a baby, wouldn’t it be better to give up?

I was terrified, thinking those kinds of things might come up.

[I’m sorry.] But he quietly apologized.

[I know you probably have a lot you want to do, and I’m holding you back.] “I thought you would hate it.”

At my tearful complaint, he spoke gently.

[How could I hate it? I just feel sorry for you.] Although our bodies were close, I often felt our hearts were far apart. There were times I felt disappointed because he was so stingy with expressing his emotions.

But hearing him speak so kindly felt like my troubled heart was being led into a warm home after wandering through rough storms.

I’m still very scared, but I’m glad. This man is a good person.

[Do you have time tomorrow? Let’s meet and talk. We’ll go to the hospital together.] “Okay.”

[Is three o’clock good?] “Yeah, that’s fine.”

[Alright. I’ll see you then.] Wiping away the tears welling in my eyes, I nodded vigorously as if I could see him right in front of me.

Did he hear me sniffle? He added another comment.

[You must have been very scared alone.] This time, I shook my head.

No. If I’m with you, I’m not scared anymore.

[Just don’t worry about anything tonight and get some rest. Okay?] “Yeah. Got it.”

By the end of the call, I was able to smile brightly.

For the first time, I thought about the baby.

It was something I hadn’t considered before.

***

If the baby comes to me, I’ll accept it as a blessing. I’ll be grateful.

I think I can do it. Because I have Jiheon.

As I was about to hang up after saying my final goodbye, he called out to me again.

[Jeong-oh.] My name sounded round and gentle.

It was clear and soft, like the sound of water flowing down the mountain, carried by the night breeze.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Jeong-oh.

On this rather chilly day, a warm name like the midday sun that seems to wrap another layer of clothing around me.

A name that brightens even the darkest nights.

[Huh?] She replied, as if to gently wrap that clear name.

“No. Sleep well.”

I almost said “I love you,” but I held it back.

For tomorrow.

After hanging up, Jiheon took a deep breath.

I wanted to soothe myself calmly, but would my feelings get across?

I had never not used contraception. So, there must have been a mistake.

There was one vague concern that lingered. I hadn’t said anything to avoid making her worry, but it seemed I only created more confusion for her.

He was surprised too but quickly composed himself.

Carrying a life can be a very challenging journey for someone. He had heard that his mother had wanted to have another child after giving birth to him, but she eventually gave up after visiting the hospital for a long time.

Therefore, a child would be a blessing. Jeong-oh should be blessed throughout the entire process as well.

As his resolve hardened, he hoped for a healthy pregnancy without any problems. He even imagined the lovely face of a child resembling Jeong-oh.

In that case, when we hold hands and go to the hospital, we must be a couple.

Even if the marriage registration is delayed a bit, even if the wedding is postponed, I believe our hearts should be united as one. He wanted her to feel completely secure with him.

On his way home, Jiheon stopped by a jewelry shop to buy an engagement ring. Although he couldn't order one that fit her hand perfectly, the store staff said they would resize it when they came back together later.

Tomorrow. Yes. Tomorrow.

Thinking about the event tomorrow made his lips dry.

She might refuse the proposal.

She was still in her third year of college.

She had expressed a desire to find a job quickly to lessen her mother's burden. She wanted to join an advertising company and become the best copywriter in Korea.

She was a woman with clear dreams and many aspirations.

The thought of being an obstacle to the woman he loved made his heart ache.

But, let's find a way together.

'We can do this, Jeong-oh.'

I won't ruin your dreams. I'll protect you.

I'll become a better person.

***

He had never thought he would be cooking for himself for the rest of his life, but meeting Jeong-oh changed everything.

Like a child, her delight in delicious food made him love her even more, so he learned to cook a few dishes.

As she enjoyed his cooking, he wanted to be loved even more, leading him to try new things. When she mentioned how handsome the cooking man on TV was, jealousy drove him to put in more effort, and eventually, cooking became entirely Jiheon's responsibility.

It was amazing how his life changed because of her, and soon enough, he found he couldn't live without her.

Perhaps marriage was something he had long desired.

Jiheon looked affectionately at the tangerines Jeong-oh had put in his pocket. He ate one and brought the other home, feeling like he couldn't waste it.

'Even if I'm holding on tightly, I want to grip it even harder. Do you understand?'

Holding the tangerine, which was about the size of a baby's fist, Jiheon smiled.

One day, he hoped that today's worries would become cherished memories.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

The next day.

Jiheon contacted Jeong-oh as usual.

– Are you in class? Pay attention in class and make sure to eat lunch. I'll see you later. I'll come pick you up.

It was his long-standing habit to contact her at noon.

– Yeah. See you!

In a hurry, her response was rushed and contained a typo. Jiheon chuckled at her message.

So cute.

He didn’t have the luxury of exchanging messages with her for long. She needed to focus on her class, and he had to prepare for the proposal.

The ring was ready, and he had to stop by the flower shop to pick up the flowers he had ordered. He needed to clear out the trunk of his car since he would be filling it with flowers.

He also had to dress nicely.

While he was choosing a suit, his phone vibrated. It was his mother.

Jiheon sighed heavily and answered the call.

“Hello.”

[Are you busy?] “Yes. A bit.”

From the short reply, he could hear his mother sigh on the other end.

[Why did you just show your face yesterday and leave? You didn’t even have time to talk to me.] He had rushed out from Jeong-oh’s house yesterday because of family obligations. He had to escort his mother, Ms. Jang Young-mi, to a charity event.

He needed to play the dutiful son at least once a year. If he didn’t meet his mother’s mood, he risked suffering all year long.

But yesterday, Jiheon was also preoccupied, and he hadn’t been able to escort her properly. He had only exchanged greetings before slipping away from the event.

“I’m sorry. I had something urgent to attend to.”

[Are you okay today? Your father is coming home early today. Come over, play a game of Go with him, and have dinner.] “Ah… I’m a bit busy today.”

[Busy again? What’s so busy?] “I’ll tell you later.”

[Is it something you can’t talk about right now?] “Is everything alright with you? Are you feeling well?”

Not wanting to speak about Jeong-oh, Jiheon changed the subject.

[I’m fine. But the other day, your brother was attacked. Someone threw eggs at his car.] His mother’s voice sounded alarmed, as if eggs were grenades.

“His car was attacked, not him.”

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[Anyway, it’s terrible. Do you know how worried I am?] “Your brother is about to become the group’s CEO. Just tell him to be more careful.”

[Is he going to listen to me? Honestly, where do I have the energy to care about Ji-tae? I can’t even keep track of my own son.] Jeong Ji-tae, director of strategic planning at Seoyeon Foods, is Jiheon’s half-brother. He is a talent who will one day succeed his father as the head of the group.

Thanks to his brother, Jiheon could live relatively free from his father’s interference. While his mother disapproved of this, Jiheon was grateful to his brother.

“Don’t worry about me. You should rest. I’ll drop by soon. I want to introduce you to a friend.”

[What? Who?] “I’ll get back to you.”

Throwing out a topic that would pique his mother’s curiosity, Jiheon hurriedly ended the call.

If he succeeded in the proposal, he would have to tell his parents. He was sure his mother would feel a bit disappointed at first, but she would soon come to like her.

His mother, who had been his father's secretary, had gone through many ups and downs before marriage. So, she would understand her position.

After checking his reflection in the mirror, Jiheon put the ring case in his pocket and left the house.

He hoped today would be a perfect day.

Imagining the few hours ahead made him both anxious and excited.

Jeong-oh. Our baby will be so beautiful.

The idea of a new life that he hadn't even confirmed yet filled him with strange emotions.

There were so many things he wanted to do for the baby that would someday be born.

I'll let them be the first to step on the snow that fell overnight.

I'll let them see the stars rising.

I'll teach them how to ride a bicycle.

I'll hold their hand.

I'll protect them.

I'll look them in the eyes and tell them I love them.

The emotions he had never felt before already felt like they were taking shape, and his heart continued to flutter.

As Jiheon walked down to the underground parking lot, he made his way toward the parked car.

With each step he took, his footfalls felt both heavy and light.

The appointment was set for 3 PM. Despite having plenty of time, he couldn’t understand why his steps kept quickening.

But suddenly, a parked car blocked his path. Its headlights shone brightly.

As Jiheon raised his hand to shield his eyes from the blinding light, the car rushed toward him.

Gasp.

He hurriedly moved to the side, but it was not enough to avoid it.

The car, racing like a wild horse, slammed into Jiheon.

Crash!

Screech!

With a strike like lightning, Jiheon’s body was lifted onto the bumper and then smashed against the windshield, only to be thrown out onto the ground.

It all happened in an instant.

A flash of light flickered before his eyes, and in an instant, the world blurred. He felt the hot liquid flowing from his body soaking the ground.

***

No.

Jeong-oh. I need to get to you.

Despite his will, he couldn’t move his body. A searing pain surged through him as if his body were being torn apart.

As his consciousness faded, he heard the sound of a car door opening and footsteps approaching.

Thud thud. The footsteps stopped in front of him. Jiheon couldn’t even lift his head.

Help me. Please, help me.

He shouted dozens of times in his heart, but he could not make a sound.

However, the person responsible for the accident showed no intention of helping Jiheon and instead asked a strange question.

“Have you ever heard the name…?”

What?

It felt as if he had lost his hearing; the man’s voice sounded distant and unclear.

The man who asked such a pointless question abandoned Jiheon and got back into his car.

With the sound of the car driving away, Jiheon felt life slipping away from him. It was as if the angel of death had arrived; his body felt cold.

He gathered all his strength to squirm. He felt the edge of the ring case brush against his fingertips.

He thought of the lovely partner he had wanted to love even more in the many days to come.

Long hair swaying gently like cosmos flowers. A pale face. Large eyes that became crescent moons when she smiled.

You have such a beautiful smile.

‘Jeong-oh.’

The thought of her crying made his heart feel as if it were being torn apart.

I wanted to treat you well. More, more, I wanted to treat you well.

I wanted to live happily for a long time.

Will you have to give up the child because of me?

Yes, it would be hard to raise them alone.

But I understand.

I love you. Jeong-oh.

Why did I hold back those words?

Why couldn’t I express myself more?

At the end of life, shrouded in black mist, Jiheon wept desperately.

I’m sorry. Jeong-oh.

I love you…

Ch3 - Someone Seems to be Crying

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Eunbi arrived at the officetel her brother Eunyeob had bought.

Eunbi, who had left for the United States to study three years ago, returned to Korea before completing four years. She passed the transfer examination for K University and set foot on Korean soil again.

In response to his younger sister’s desire to live independently, her brother gladly got her an apartment.

However, he did not fulfill her request. Eunbi wanted an officetel close to the university, but the place Eunyeob found was not very near the school.

Still, the condition of the apartment was quite good, so Eunbi felt somewhat satisfied.

After unpacking, she noticed various necessities she needed. Eunbi left the house to buy daily essentials.

As she descended the stairs and reached the underground parking lot, Eunbi unexpectedly witnessed an incident.

Crash!

Screech!

A man was hit and fell after being struck by a car that suddenly surged forward. Eunbi was taken aback and froze in shock.

It happened so suddenly that there was no time to scream. She hid behind the wall of the emergency staircase, covering her mouth and holding her breath.

A man wearing a black cap emerged from the driver's seat. He mumbled something as he stood in front of the fallen man.

"…Have you heard of…?"

The voice of the man in the black cap was barely audible. It felt like he was asking something, but the fallen man couldn't possibly respond.

After posing the brief question, the man in the black cap got back into his car. He abandoned the man and drove away immediately.

Once the car had disappeared, Eunbi finally exhaled.

She peeked her head out to survey the parking lot. She could see blood flowing under the fallen man.

I need to report this!

Eunbi pulled out her phone. But her hand holding the phone trembled. Her mind went blank, and she felt an overwhelming fear.

I'd have to go back and forth to the police station. What if I got involved and it put me in danger?

Her brother, who became a lawyer this year, had once told her not to get involved in loud situations, no matter the case.

"If he's already dead, there's no point in getting involved. Someone else will report it."

I didn't see anything.

Eunbi hurriedly climbed back up the stairs and returned home.

Fortunately, a few minutes later, she heard the sound of an ambulance. From her window, she watched as the ambulance and police car arrived at the officetel in succession and then left.

Had the man died?

Whether he lived or died, she hoped nothing bothersome would happen to her.

In the evening, she received a call from her brother Eunyeob. Eunbi picked up the phone right away.

“Hello.”

[Did you check out the house?]
“Yeah. The house is nice, but it’s too far from the school. Why did you have to get this officetel?”

[Eun Jiheon lives there.]
Eunyeob’s answer made the determined expression on Eunbi’s face turn dazed.

Eun Jiheon!

Her heart raced with excitement, like a teenage girl.

Eunbi transferred to K University because it was the university Jiheon attended. She heard that Jiheon would soon graduate, but still, Eunbi wanted to have some connection with him.

Three years ago, it was Jiheon’s existence that made her hesitate the longest at the crossroads of studying abroad in America.

Eunbi’s brother’s friend, Jiheon, was her first love. And that unrequited love had yet to end.

Although she had dated a few times in the U.S., she couldn’t give up her feelings for Jiheon. That’s why she returned.

Eunbi swallowed hard and asked again to confirm the truth.

“Jiheon oppa lives here? Do you know what unit number?”

[But that’s not the problem; apparently, there was an accident today.]
Eunyeob’s voice suddenly turned dark. Eunbi tilted her head in confusion.

“What?”

[They said Jiheon was hit by a hit-and-run driver in the underground parking lot today.]
Eunbi almost dropped her phone.

“…Hit-and-run?”

[Yeah. I haven’t been to the hospital yet, so I don’t know much.]
An accident that happened earlier today… Could it be that Jiheon oppa was the one involved?

“Oppa… Where’s the hospital?”

Eunbi asked with a trembling voice.

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[The phone is turned off, so it’s going to the voicemail after the beep…]
Jeongwoo hung up the phone with a worried expression.

Jiheon, who had promised to pick her up at 3 PM today, did not show up. When she called, he didn’t answer, and eventually, it went to a message saying the phone was turned off.

“Oppa has never broken a promise before.”

As time passed and it became evening, anxiety began to creep in.

Could something have happened to him? Was he in an accident?

“Or did he suddenly change his mind…?”

A myriad of thoughts flooded her mind.

The waiting time grew increasingly tense. Just yesterday, she felt she could accept her situation as a blessing, but now, everything terrified her.

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In front of the hospital's operating room.

Mrs. Jang Youngmi sat engulfed in fear.

Her son had been in a hit-and-run accident. It happened just a few minutes after she had spoken to him on the phone.

Today, he had ignored his mother's request to come home and was found in the parking lot of the officetel.

Her only son, who was more precious to her than her own life.

She couldn't believe that the son she had raised so well was now fighting for his life.

After rushing to the hospital upon hearing the news, Mrs. Jang confirmed her son's condition and cried out in despair. It felt as though the world was crumbling around her.

Why did this happen to my son?

After screaming to the point of exhaustion, Mrs. Jang felt utterly drained when a detective assigned to the case approached her.

"Hello. I'm from the Yongsan Police Station. You must be the mother of Jeong Jiheon?"

Mrs. Jang looked at the detective with an expressionless face.

"They said the building's CCTV malfunctioned, so there's no footage available. Fortunately, there was a parked vehicle with a dashcam, so we

secured the vehicle's license plate number. We've also obtained some footage of the hit-and-run and identified the suspect."

"Please catch him… Catch that bastard for sure…"

Mrs. Jang pleaded with the detective, her dignity as the wife of a prominent CEO long forgotten. The sight of her clinging to the detective and sobbing was pitiful.

"The suspect's name is Kim Jingu. Have you heard of him?"

Mrs. Jang shook her head. Tears she thought had dried up began to flow again.

As the detective stood there awkwardly due to Mrs. Jang's tears, a woman approached him.

"Are you the detective? I'm a witness to the hit-and-run incident at the officetel."

The detective turned his attention from Mrs. Jang to the young woman.

"I just moved into the officetel today. I went down to the parking lot for a moment and witnessed the hit-and-run."

At the young woman's voice, Mrs. Jang lifted her head. The face was vaguely familiar.

"Mother, it's me, Eunbi. Chae Eunbi. Do you remember me?"

Eunbi firmly held onto the swaying Mrs. Jang to support her and greeted her.

"Ah… Eunbi! It's Eunbi…"

In a daze, Mrs. Jang could only nod her head. The daughter of a well-known legal family, she was the sister of Eunbyeol, Eunbi's brother's friend, Jeong Jiheon.

“Mother, please calm down and stay strong. Oppa will be fine during the surgery. I’ll go to the police station to give my statement. They will catch the culprit for sure.”

Eunbi comforted Mrs. Jang with a mature demeanor, as if the roles had reversed; Eunbi was the adult, and Mrs. Jang was the child.

“I’ll be back after I go to the police station. The surgery will take a while, so please go home. I’ll contact you after the surgery is over.”

At Eunbi’s calm reassurance, Mrs. Jang wept once more, mumbling thanks to Eunbi through her tears.

Accompanying the detective to the police station, Eunbi recounted everything she had witnessed in as much detail as possible.

“It was a very serious hit-and-run. The perpetrator was a man wearing a black hat and black clothes. He seemed to be about 180 cm tall, and his voice was husky.”

“Did the suspect say anything?”

“Yes. He asked the fallen victim something like, ‘Have you ever heard of a robbery hit-and-run?’ It was something along those lines.”

Eunbi added a bit of imagination to her recollection.

“If I saw his face, I think I could recognize him for sure.”

As she relayed her account, the two of them arrived at the police station.

Upon entering the station, Eunbi immediately recognized the suspect. Coincidentally, the suspect, Kim Jingu, had just been arrested at his home and brought to the station.

“This is the guy! This guy!”

Eunbi shouted in front of the suspect, Kim Jingu.

“What is this girl talking about? Do you know me? Why are you doing this to me? Why?”

With his hands cuffed, Kim Jingu twisted his body and shouted, his eyes wide with a look of utter injustice.

But Eunbi was certain.

“This is definitely his voice! No doubt about it!”

With a determined expression, Eunbi clenched her fist tightly. The man who harmed the brother she had admired felt like an enemy to her. On the other hand, she felt exhilarated to have done something righteous.

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After the suspect was caught, Mrs. Jang received her son’s belongings: his cellphone, car smart key, and a ring case.

The ring case.

After turning on the cellphone, Mrs. Jang discovered that her son was supposed to go on a date with someone named Jeong-O at noon.

Because of the date, he had refused his mother’s request to come home.

And it was because of that date that he had been involved in the hit-and-run.

– Oppa, where are you?

– Oppa, we were supposed to meet at 3 PM today. Did something happen?

– I can’t reach you. I’m worried. If you see this message, please contact me.

– What’s going on? Nothing’s wrong, right? Please just send me a text.

Checking the dozens of text messages from Jeong-O, Mrs. Jang clenched her fists and her heart raced.

“I have a friend I want you to meet.”

Her son had said that in their last phone conversation.

It seemed he had wanted to introduce her to this Jeong-O.

How much must he like her to refuse my request and go on a date?

Mrs. Jang felt nothing but resentment towards her son’s girlfriend.

After having someone investigate this Jeong-O, Mrs. Jang was even more astonished.

Jeong-O, a junior at H University, 23 years old, daughter of a single mother. A child raised without a father.

It was needless to say that they were incredibly poor, and that mother had not received a proper education.

“Because of a girl like this, my son…”

The surgery went well, but Jiheon had not yet regained consciousness. With her son still unconscious, her resentment towards Jeong-O grew even stronger.

Mrs. Jang sent a short text message to Jeong-O using Jiheon’s cellphone.

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– Don’t contact me again.

Three days after losing contact, Jiheon sent a text message.

The content of the short message startled Jeong-O.

The Jiheon she knew would never say such things.

Jeong-O immediately went to Jiheon’s house.

She hadn’t been there often, but she had been invited once or twice a month. Jiheon had even given her the door lock password, telling her she could come over anytime and stay the night.

Was it really possible that someone like him would suddenly break up with her through a text? Telling her not to contact him again?

Jeong-O couldn’t believe the source of the message. She thought something must be wrong.

However, upon arriving in front of Jiheon’s house, Jeong-O encountered a problem.

‘Room 1903. This should be the right place…?’

The door lock for Jiheon’s room 1903 didn’t match her memory.

‘Could it be…?’

Her heart raced. She pressed the doorbell, but there was no response from inside.

With trembling fingers, Jeong-O entered the door lock password she remembered.

The door didn’t open.

She tried her own house password, her birthday, and Jiheon’s birthday one after the other. After a few wrong attempts, a loud alarm went off. Jeong-O’s face turned bright red when suddenly the door opened from inside.

A middle-aged woman stared at Jeong-O with a stern expression. Jeong-O swallowed hard and asked her,

“Um, is this not Jeong Jiheon’s house?”

“Are you Lee Jeong-O?”

The woman knew Jeong-O’s name.

“I’m Jiheon’s mother. Come in.”

The coldly spoken words felt like chains dragging Jeong-O inside. She felt like she was being pulled in against her will as she entered the apartment.

Mrs. Jang scanned Jeong-O up and down as she stepped inside. Seeing Jeong-O approach timidly, with her head bowed like someone who had committed a crime, Mrs. Jang sighed heavily.

Perhaps it was because she knew Jeong-O came from a single-parent household; she felt an innate shadow hanging over her.

There was no way she could allow such a girl to be near her son.

“What kind of behavior is it to keep pressing someone else’s door lock?”

“Jiheon Oppa told me the door lock password before.”

“That password has changed, so I’m saying this. If you pressed it once and it didn’t work, you should have given up.”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t reach Oppa, so I was worried something might have happened.”

She was more daring than she appeared.

Mrs. Jang thought that polite words might not be enough to dissuade her. She decided to be more assertive.

“How much have you tormented my Jiheon?”

“……”

“How annoying must you have been for Jiheon to send me here?”

Tears like glass beads welled up in Jeong-O’s eyes at Mrs. Jang’s sharp words. Unable to bear the sight, Mrs. Jang turned her head away.

“If you understand, don’t come back again. I’m not so idle that I can deal with kids like Jiheon.”

“Mother, please wait.”

Jeong-O pleaded, grabbing Mrs. Jang’s arm.

“Could you let me talk to Oppa just once?”

“Don’t call me ‘mother’ out of nowhere.”

Mrs. Jang violently shook off Jeong-O’s hand.

My son is fighting for his life right now.

No matter how much you beg to talk to him, he’s in no condition to do so.

She felt a surge of anger, believing everything was because of this Jeong-O.

“Leave while I’m still being polite. Don’t torment my Jiheon any longer.”

Mrs. Jang said harshly.

Tears fell from Jeong-O’s eyes onto the floor.

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It had been fifteen days since Jiheon had the accident. He still had not regained consciousness.

Eunbi visited the hospital every day.

“Mother, have you had some rest?”

Eunbi greeted Mrs. Jang, who was keeping watch in the hospital room, with a bright smile.

“Eunbi, you’re here.”

At Mrs. Jang’s weak greeting, Eunbi’s expression turned to one of concern.

“If this goes on, you might collapse too. You should get some nutrients; I asked a doctor I know to help you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Still, please get the shot. I have a feeling Oppa will wake up today. When he does, he’ll look for you first, so you should show him a bright face.”

Eunbi gently led Mrs. Jang out of the room. Mrs. Jang, unable to resist, followed Eunbi’s suggestion and headed toward the reserved inpatient room.

After sending Mrs. Jang away, Jiheon became Eunbi’s focus. She gazed tenderly at Jiheon, who was sound asleep like a prince in a fairy tale.

Even with his eyes closed, his handsome features remained unchanged.

Perhaps he hadn’t changed at all in the three years since they first met.

No, he seemed to have gotten even more handsome.

Should I try to give him a quick kiss? He wouldn’t know anyway.

Entranced by Jiheon’s beauty, Eunbi leaned in closer until their lips were almost touching.

Just a second before their lips met.

“Um, um.”

The hospital door opened, and a man entered. Eunbi quickly pulled away from Jiheon and adjusted her seating.

It was Park Seungkyu, Jiheon’s friend.

A classmate from both high school and university, as well as a senior from the military.

“You’re here again today,” he said, his tone seeming almost mocking.

Eunbi responded with a smile despite Seungkyu’s sour expression.

“Yes. I’m worried about Oppa.”

Seungkyu didn’t soften his expression at her kind reply.

“Why are you here, Seungkyu?”

“What else would I be here for? To see my friend.”

He answered Eunbi bluntly, showing his dislike for her without reservation. Even if he was Jiheon’s friend, she didn’t feel inclined to be nice to him.

Seungkyu moved closer to Jiheon as if he were worried about leaving them alone together.

The already quiet room was filled with an uncomfortable silence.

“By the way, there’s something strange.”

Seungkyu spoke up unexpectedly, breaking the silence that was wearing Eunbi down.

“Jiheon’s accident happened at 1 PM, and the report was filed at 1:20 PM. The person who reported it was a man.”

“……”

“You said you witnessed the accident, right? Why didn’t you report it right away?”

Eunbi was taken aback by the unexpected question.

“……My phone battery was dead. I turned it on and tried to report it, but someone else had already done it.”

Seungkyu nodded, still looking skeptical.

Eunbi felt irritated by his reaction. It seemed like he was probing for something deeper, and it made her uneasy.

“Why are you asking about that, anyway?”

“Oh, well… Ah! Jiheon!”

Seungkyu’s response trailed off as he suddenly called out Jiheon’s name.

Eunbi also turned her head toward Jiheon.

“Oppa!”

“Jiheon! Jeong Jiheon!”

Finally, Jiheon opened his eyes.

At first, he blinked and rolled his eyes without saying a word, as if trying to sit up.

Seungkyu helped raise Jiheon’s upper body on the electric bed.

“Are you okay? Can you see me? Do you know who I am?”

Seungkyu asked Jiheon as he adjusted his position.

After staring at Seungkyu for a long time, Jiheon finally spoke.

“Who…?”

It was a face that seemed somewhat familiar, but he couldn’t remember the name.

“……You don’t know me?”

“……”

“Park Seungkyu! We went to high school and college together! And I was your senior in the military. We got close after you were discharged. Don’t

you remember?”

“Military?”

Jiheon hesitantly asked with his pale lips.

He thought he still had months left before even entering boot camp, so it was shocking to hear the mention of military service.

“I went to the military? Me?”

At his question, both Seungkyu and Eunbi’s eyes widened in surprise.

Jiheon couldn’t understand why they looked so confused.

Suddenly, a terrible headache surged through him.

Ugh. Jiheon grimaced and let out a rough groan.

“Jiheon!”

“Oppa!”

The voices of the two people in front of him sounded distant.

It felt like needles were stabbing his brain.

He felt like he was forgetting something very important.

Someone seemed to be crying.

His chest felt tight, and his head throbbed.

Ch4 - Seven Years Later

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“It appears that he has lost his memory for about the last three years.”

Mrs. Jang asked the attending physician for clarification.

“If it’s three years, that means my son’s memories are stuck at the age of twenty-three?”

“That’s correct.”

“Is it possible that his memories will come back someday?”

“That could happen. However, since it might be distressing for the patient, please try not to stress him too much. The patient’s stability is the priority.”

“……”

“There could be other issues as well, so you will need to monitor him for a long time.”

At the doctor’s advice, Mrs. Jang’s pulse quickened.

It was unfortunate that her son had lost three years of memories.

But if it was just the recent three years—then perhaps it could be for the better!

In the past three years, what had happened to her son was only his military enlistment, his discharge, and a brief romance with a girl named Lee Jeong-o.

If it was just that much, losing those memories might not be a bad thing at all.

His university life had only spanned two semesters in those three years, so he wouldn’t be far behind others.

Mrs. Jang’s mind raced with ideas.

She needed to erase all traces of her son’s past, especially any remnants related to that girl, Jeong-o. Then they could go back to the time when he didn’t know her and start anew.

This was an opportunity for her son to be happier.

“Yes. I will keep a close watch. Thank you, doctor.”

Mrs. Jang thanked the physician and stepped out of the consultation room.

Outside the room stood Eunbi, wearing a worried expression.

“Mother.”

The daughter of Supreme Court judge Chae Seobok.

This girl, who had recently returned to Korea after studying in the United States, had faithfully kept vigil at Jiheon’s bedside.

It could be a sense of duty as a witness to the hit-and-run incident, but she seemed to genuinely care for Jiheon.

She was from a good family and well-educated.

If she were to be my son’s partner, she should at least be this capable.

“Right, Eunbi.”

“What did the doctor say?”

“They said he has lost memories from the past three years. They don’t know if they will return or not.”

Mrs. Jang sighed deeply as she spoke to Eunbi.

“……Then has he lost his memory of me too?”

Eunbi’s face also showed concern, with tears pooling in her eyes.

“Oppa really liked me a lot, you know.”

“Oh, really?”

“He even said he wanted to date me when he returned to Korea, though it was probably a joke. But now he won’t remember that.”

Upon hearing Eunbi’s confession, Mrs. Jang instinctively grasped Eunbi’s hand tightly.

“It’s okay! We can start over.”

“Really? Do you think so?”

“Of course. Absolutely.”

Seeing her shy smile as Mrs. Jang encouraged her made her look truly beautiful. Mrs. Jang sincerely began to envision a happy future.

How wonderful it would be if such a girl were to become her daughter-in-law one day.

After parting with Eunbi, Mrs. Jang returned to the hospital room.

Jiheon, who had been sleeping, was now awake, staring blankly out the window.

“You’re awake? How do you feel?”

“Just okay.”

Jiheon replied dryly, his tone flat and emotionless. Mrs. Jang tried again to engage him; she wanted to infuse some life into her son.

“Did you see Eunbi? While you were lying there unconscious, she worked really hard. She came to visit you every single day.”

“Eunbyeol’s younger sister?”

“Yes. She just returned from studying abroad a few days ago and was still a bit disoriented, but she took good care of you.”

“……”

“By the way, do you remember this? You seemed to think Eunbi was really cute. Before you went abroad, you even said that you’d date her when you returned to Korea.”

“Is that so? That’s strange.”

“……”

“Eunbyeol’s sister isn’t really my type.”

Jiheon spoke coldly, as if he had no emotions.

His expression was empty, as if a huge hole had opened in his chest.

It seemed that not only had his accident caused him to lose his memory, but it also severed many of his emotional connections.

Watching this, Mrs. Jang couldn’t help but let out a weak smile.

“Well, it might just be something said out of courtesy.”

“……”

“But that girl is really kind and pretty. She’s bright and smart. She treated me very well, too. You must have thought her actions were cute as well.”

No, he probably wouldn’t say such nonsense even as a courtesy. He likely didn’t find her cute at all.

Jiheon wanted to argue, but at the same time, he felt like saying nothing, so he remained silent.

What had happened during the three years he lost?

The military… Was it that hard for him? How could he have no memories at all?

He wanted to recall even the smallest detail, but it was useless. As his brow furrowed, Mrs. Jang, looking worried, asked,

“What’s wrong? Does your head hurt again?”

“I’m fine.”

“……”

“I just feel like I’ve forgotten something very important.”

The more he struggled to recall his memories, the more his head felt like it would split open.

Yet, instead of tears flowing from his eyes, it felt as if they were welling up from his chest.

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Jeong-o couldn’t go to the hospital.

When she was with Jiheon, it felt like they could overcome everything, but just the fact that she had lost contact with him completely sapped her spirit.

But her body was honest. Sleepiness overcame her, and a pressing pain settled in her chest. Even when she sat still, it felt like she was nauseous.

She couldn’t put it off any longer. She couldn’t keep despairing like this.

She had to make a decision.

Let’s try just one more time.

Let’s try to contact him just one last time.

Taking a deep breath, Jeong-o courageously picked up her phone.

Ringing… Her heart raced throughout the ringing tone, but the call never connected.

Her heart crumbled once again, leaving her mind in ruins to the point where she couldn’t even lay a single brick of hope.

Just when she felt so dry that even tears wouldn’t come, her phone vibrated for the first time in a long while.

Unexpectedly, Jiheon’s name appeared.

Jeong-o hurriedly answered the call.

“Hello.”

[Lee Jeong-o?] It was undoubtedly Jiheon’s voice. How long had it been since she heard him?

“Oppa….”

She had so much to say. So, so much. All the hurt she had felt burst forth.

Tears began to well up in her eyes, which she thought had run dry.

“Why didn’t you contact me…?”

She spoke in a tone that seemed to be whining. But she couldn’t get really angry.

Right. I thought something was wrong too. Oppa wouldn’t just cut off contact like that.

“Oppa, is something wrong? Nothing happened, right?”

But her resentment didn’t last long. It was more important to check on his condition.

[I’m doing well.] Jeong-o felt relieved at the response that came from the other end of the line.

Okay. As long as nothing happened, that’s all that mattered. Now, the two of them could resolve the other issues together.

She wanted to say that.

[I heard that my mother met you instead of me. Wasn’t that the end of it?] His dry voice returned.

“……Huh?”

[Wasn’t my opinion already conveyed?] His words sounded so cold that she could hardly believe it was his true feelings.

[Since it’s burdensome, can you not contact me anymore?] But it was unmistakably his voice.

Jeong-o’s expression froze. A darker shadow loomed over her, greater than the one that had engulfed her when they first lost contact.

[You wouldn’t want to be a stumbling block in someone else’s life, would you?] She felt as if she couldn’t breathe.

Did he think she was a stumbling block in his life?

Why? Because she was having a child?

[You’d better be prepared when you reach out again.] “……Prepared for what?”

“What do you mean by ‘be prepared’?”

[I’m going to hang up, thinking you understood. Take care.] His calm and sharp voice brought the conversation to an end.

Click.

Without a response to her question, and before she could even offer any kind of greeting, the call ended.

This couldn’t be happening.

She felt completely drained and dropped her phone from her hand.

But then she shook her head.

That can’t be true. It must be a lie.

Picking up her phone again, Jeong-o wiped away her tears with her sleeve and quickly dialed Jiheon’s number again.

[The phone is off, followed by a beeping sound and voicemail…] The automated voice, which she had heard dozens of times, rang painfully in her ears.

That was the end of their connection.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

Oppa, our child has just turned one.

She’s started calling me “Mommy.”

I don’t know where she learned it, but sometimes she even calls me “Daddy.”

Jiheon, now our child is running around.

She’s starting kindergarten.

She’s very curious and eats well.

She loves touching my face, and occasionally she sings songs.

Jiheon, next year, Ye-na will be a first grader.

She’s very pretty, has a good personality, and has many friends.

Even without a dad, you wouldn’t believe how bright she is.

I no longer wait for your contact.

Thinking about it, you never told me you loved me.

Well, I don’t think it was all a lie.

You must have liked me to some extent, but you probably didn’t love me enough to say it.

That’s okay. It’s fine now.

The season that I couldn’t let go of for so long has left behind nothing but a hard residue like a steel ball.

And enough time has passed for that steel ball to rust again.

7 years have passed.

Now, she no longer cries over the love she lost.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

“Mom, why is there a gacha machine here?”

On the way back from her academy.

Ye-na, who had let go of her mother’s hand and rushed a few steps ahead, stopped in front of the gacha machine and asked.

“Mom, why is there a gacha machine here?”

The bright eyes of the child, looking up at her, tickled Jeong-o’s heart.

Like a black pebble shimmering in the clear valley water, her curious expression was so lovely that even her slyness was endearing.

“Ye-na, are you really asking why the gacha machine is here, or do you want to try it?”

Jeong-o squinted and asked.

“Be honest.”

“I want to try it.”

Caught out by her true feelings, Ye-na pursed her plump lips and confessed.

She was so cute that Jeong-o couldn’t even scold her.

Jeong-o chuckled softly.

“Choose. I’ll let you do it just once. If you don’t get what you want, that’s tough. Just this one time.”

“This one.”

Ye-na pointed to the gacha machine at the bottom left.

“It eats three 500 won coins. Ye-na, how much is that?”

“1,500 won!”

Jeong-o had asked to teach her math, but Ye-na responded faster than usual.

She must have already calculated it in her head.

Jeong-o glanced at Ye-na with half-opened eyes and handed her three 500 won coins.

Ye-na confidently inserted the coins into the gacha machine.

Seeing how adept she was at handling the machine, it seemed she had learned this trick from her grandmother.

That seven-year-old girl was very clever.

Jeong-o thought of the sly man from seven years ago.

So subtly cunning that he never realized she was deceived.

It struck her as funny that she was reminded of Ye-na's father in such a strange way.

'But I'm not the Lee Jeong-o of that time anymore.'

Jeong-o had become someone who could smile wryly at the innocent version of herself from seven years ago.

Occasionally recalling him didn't mean she missed him at all.

It was just like a farmer reflecting on an extreme drought.

A dreadful past.

She wished never to encounter it again.

"Wow! Mom! I got what I wanted!"

Ye-na, holding the gacha capsule, jumped up and down, but Jeong-o felt a sense of emptiness.

A rubber ball. Just a round clump of rubber. It was absurd that it cost 1,500 won for such a trivial thing, so Jeong-o asked her,

"Did you really want this, Ye-na?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

“Because it’s the same color as the Go stones.”

Ye-na, having retrieved the contents from the capsule, replied.

This rubber clump dressed like a soccer ball was similar in color to Go stones, and that made her happy.

What a delightful child.

Jeong-o couldn’t help but smile.

Like the leaves of the street trees in this season, my daughter has unexpectedly grown up again. She has become a child who knows her preferences and can express them.

Throughout the walk to the restaurant, Ye-na’s hand didn’t leave her pocket.

The way she fidgeted with the gacha ball in her pocket was very noticeable to Jeong-o.

Her steps were quicker than usual. It was clear that she was eager to reach her grandmother’s restaurant and take out the gacha ball to play with it.

The two of them walked confidently and arrived at “Guksun Baekban.”

“Guksun Baekban.” Jeong-o’s mother, Lee Guksun, runs the restaurant.

It’s a small place with only five tables, but it’s famous in the area. During lunchtime, nearby office workers line up to wait, making it quite popular.

“Grandma!”

“Is my baby here? Hurry and eat.”

As Ye-na opened the restaurant door and shouted, Guksun welcomed her with a broad smile. Dinner for the two of them was already prepared on the table.

Before even sitting down, Ye-na took the gacha ball out of her pocket.

“You got another one, didn’t you?”

Guksun noticed what Ye-na was holding and asked. Ye-na didn’t respond, as if feeling guilty.

Tonight’s dinner menu was bean sprout soup and stir-fried pork.

Without any pork cutlets or tteokbokki on the table, Ye-na quickly grew sullen.

Unaware of Ye-na’s feelings, Guksun picked up the anchovy side dish and placed it on Ye-na’s bowl.

“Come on, sweetie. You need to eat.”

Since Ye-na wasn’t moving, Guksun’s hand instinctively reached for Ye-na’s spoon. She scooped rice from Ye-na’s bowl and brought it to her mouth.

“Mom, let her eat by herself.”

Jeong-o, sitting across from her, spooned rice into her own mouth like a servant as she spoke.

“She’s not eating because of that.”

Guksun retorted.

Her daughter and granddaughter were Guksun’s treasures.

Watching her daughter eat the rice she cooked until she was full and seeing her granddaughter’s mouth filled with food brought Guksun joy for the day.

As if sensing this, Ye-na looked at her mother and said, “Grandma, I feel full just watching Mom eat.”

Heh. Jeong-o burst out laughing as she swallowed her rice.

Children are mirrors of adults.

Children gather the pieces of words thrown out carelessly by adults and make them their own.

So, Jeong-o also tries to speak beautifully and act kindly to set an example for her daughter, Ye-na.

Even during the meal, Guksun got up several times to attend to customers. Jeong-o tried to help, but Guksun cherished her daughter.

“Eat quickly and go home. Prepare for work tomorrow.”

“There’s nothing to prepare for work.”

“It’s your first day after changing jobs. You need to be mentally prepared.”

As if mental preparation were akin to a large-scale move, Guksun’s voice was filled with strength.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

The next day.

“Do well. Don’t skip lunch.”

On her first day at the new company, Jeong-o left the house, seeing Guksun off.

She moved to this new company on the recommendation of a senior who had already transferred. It’s a small company, but the conditions were good, so she didn’t hesitate for long.

However, when Jeong-o arrived at the new company, her senior immediately told her to come to Gangnam.

At the bank intersection, Jeong-o waited for her senior. After a while, her senior arrived.

“Assistant Lee.”

“Senior.”

After greeting her senior, Jeong-o asked what was on her mind.

“Why did you call me here?”

“The company was sold. To Max Planning.”

An unpredictable life.

Jeong-o couldn’t close her gaping mouth and finally asked after a long pause, “When?”

“The official announcement was made last night. Didn’t you see the article?”

As if she would have. Last night, she went to bed early as her mother advised.

“It seems everything progressed really quickly. But your position as an assistant is still there. Only the company building and the management have changed. It’s just a brief confusion, and it will be sorted out soon.”

“…….”

“Since this is your first job wherever you go, I arranged for you to start directly here without needing to sign the employment contract twice. I’ll be moving here soon too, so don’t worry.”

Now that she thought about it, the place her senior had asked her to meet was in front of the building of Max Planning.

While Max Planning was a better company with a decent location, it was sudden.

“The HR team has contacted you. Go on in quickly.”

“By myself?”

“You can do it, Assistant Lee.”

Her senior encouraged Jeong-o with a pat on the shoulder.

The excitement and tension of her first day at a new job was overshadowed by extreme fear.

She felt like she was alone in the vast ocean.

But life is originally solitary.

Thirty years. The experiences of a life not short have now become Jeong-o’s assets. Compared to the despair of long ago, this level of tension is nothing.

Lee Jeong-o, you can do it!

Jeong-o firmly steadied herself and entered the building.

In front of the company entrance stood a woman and a man.

“Is this Lee Jeong-o?”

When Jeong-o replied, “Yes!” the man introduced her to the woman.

“Team Leader, this is the new copywriter, Lee Jeong-o.”

The woman nodded enthusiastically and extended her hand toward Jeong-o.

“Assistant Lee Jeong-o, nice to meet you. I’m Seong Mi-ran, the team leader of Production Team 2. Let’s do well together.”

“Yes. I look forward to working with you.”

Feeling reassured by the team leader’s pleasant demeanor, Jeong-o followed Mi-ran after parting ways with the HR staff.

“I heard about you. You moved from Sang-A Planning and ended up here.”

“Yes.”

“It must be confusing. Things have been quite hectic here lately, so we won’t have much time to help you adjust. You’ll be able to adapt, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

Jeong-o replied confidently.

Contrary to the introduction of chaos, the inside of the company was eerily quiet.

Noticing something unusual, Mi-ran asked a colleague from the adjacent team as they walked to their seats.

“Why is it so quiet?”

“Director Jeong is over there,” the colleague replied, pointing down the hallway.

Jeong-o turned to look at the end of the corridor. There stood a tall, slender man, noticeably taller than the others. His back seemed more fitting for a model than someone referred to as a director.

“Oh? Then there’s no need to greet him separately.”

Mi-ran murmured as if to herself, then leaned closer to Jeong-o and said seriously, “Actually, the director is scarier than the CEO. He’s only been here a week…”

“…….”

“He’s the son of the group chairman.”

The chairman’s son. Someone from a different world.

Maybe it was the tension, but her stomach churned.

“I need to do well. I need to do well.”

Just as Jeong-o steadied herself again, Director Jeong turned around.

Life is always unpredictable.

Jeong-o’s face stiffened as she looked down the hallway.

…That body, that face.

Seven years. The gap of time felt like a lie, but even from a distance, she recognized him clearly.

The father of my child.

Jeong Ji-heon. It was him.

She never expected to meet him like this.

She didn’t know he would turn out to be this kind of person.

While Jeong-o was so startled that she couldn’t move, he approached her without hesitation, without even a moment’s pause or tremor in his eyes.

Step by step, step by step.

The sound of his heels hitting the ground echoed like heavy chains locking around her body.

It felt as though all her breath had been cut off, making it difficult to breathe.

Only her heart struggled inside, as if it might leap out at any moment.

He was getting closer.

An encounter she had once dreamt of.

But now, she wanted to shake her head in denial.

As she vigorously shook her head in her mind, he drew near.

At last, his footsteps, matching hers in rhythm and pace, came to a stop right in front of her.

Time froze.

Without her realizing it, she took half a step back, but Ji-heon firmly held onto her.

Ch5 - At First Sight, In a Glance

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She had thought about it.

The land of Seoul couldn’t be that vast, so it was possible that they might brush past each other someday.

Jeong-o had imagined that coincidence.

And she had steeled her heart.

Even if she ran into him, she wouldn’t be flustered.

She wouldn’t cry, laugh, or get angry.

She wouldn’t feel pain. She wouldn’t say she had suffered much.

She would treat him as calmly as possible.

If they brushed past, then so be it…

Despite making this resolve several times.

Her heart felt like it was malfunctioning, clattering as if it were breaking down. No, it felt like her whole body was broken.

She couldn’t move. She didn’t even have the strength to shake off his grip on her arm.

Tears threatened to fall, but it felt as if he had blocked every part of her, and she couldn’t let them out.

Their eyes reflected each other’s faces.

Unlike Jeong-o, who could hardly breathe, Ji-heon looked at her face with indifference.

No signs of happiness, surprise, disgust, or embarrassment. Just an expression looking at something insignificant.

…What on earth could I possibly say here?

As all sorts of emotions flitted through her, Ji-heon straightened her up.

Jeong-o’s legs were still trembling. She wanted to crumple down to the floor.

Before the moment became too awkward, Mi-ran introduced Jeong-o to Ji-heon.

“Director, this is Lee Jeong-o, the new copywriter in Production Team 2.”

“Oh, a copywriter.”

He didn’t even raise an eyebrow and instead recited her position instead of her name.

To you, I am merely that kind of person.

It was surprising, embarrassing, and hollow, yet her lips remained still.

“Nice to meet you.”

He calmly extended his hand to shake hers.

Jeong-o slowly moved her head to look down at that hand.

It felt as though a thick line was drawn over the tips of his fingers.

It seemed like he was saying, “I’m sorry to meet you like this, but please keep your distance.”

After hesitating, Jeong-o slowly reached out her hand. There was nothing she could do about the trembling in her fingers.

The man she hadn’t seen for seven years. The hand she had grasped after seven years.

His hand was still large enough to completely envelop hers, but the warmth she once felt was no longer there.

‘…Is this your answer?’

Don’t cry.

She bit her teeth tightly to swallow her emotions.

Only after confirming his reaction could she recall her long-ago resolution.

She would treat him as calmly as possible.

She wouldn’t crumble.

She lifted her head to face him.

His eyes were dark, dry, and cold like a desert night.

The deep, profound eyes she had once loved so dearly were no longer there.

‘You’ve changed so much.’

It felt as if he were someone else…

Jeong-o decided to accept reality.

Finally, their hands separated.

Without displaying any emotion, he calmly walked away.

Only then did a long sigh escape between her lips.

Her legs gave way, forcing her to lean against the wall next to her.

“Are you okay?” Mi-ran, who was standing beside her, asked.

“Oh, yes. I’m fine.”

Jeong-o hurriedly replied as she stood up straight.

What should I do now? Can I continue working at this company?

Realistic worries continued to fill her mind. It felt like the inside of her scalp was drying out.

With her mind still dazed, she was led by Mi-ran and soon arrived at their team’s area.

“This is our team’s personnel I talked about yesterday. This is copywriter Lee Jeong-o.”

Mi-ran introduced Jeong-o to the team members. Two people stood up from their seats.

“This is our team’s PD, Park Young-gwang, and this is graphic designer Song Gi-hoon.”

After Mi-ran introduced the two, Jeong-o finally regained her senses.

“Hello. I’m copywriter Lee Jeong-o.”

“Oh, so you’re the assistant. Welcome.”

“Wow! Hello!”

The man who looked to be in his mid-thirties and the one in his twenties greeted her in turn. Both had friendly expressions. However, the woman who merely turned her head slightly without standing up wore a disgruntled expression.

“And this is graphic designer Ko Eun-joo.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Eun-joo nodded her head to greet her and then turned back to her monitor. Her expression didn’t match her words of welcome.

Jeong-o thought that working in this company wouldn’t be easy.

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“NO, NO, NO! I’m not learning Go, ughhh!”

Dobin sat down in front of the Go academy building and cried out loud.

Passersby cast curious glances at him. To them, the Go academy seemed less like a place of learning and more like a slaughterhouse.

“Come on, stop crying!”

His mom, Jin-seo, raised her voice as well. Although they were attracting attention, there was nothing they could do.

Last week, while sitting next to her dad watching a Go broadcast, the boy had asked him various questions about the rules of Go. His questions showed a surprising insight for a seven-year-old.

When she asked if he wanted to try attending a Go academy since he showed interest, Dobin excitedly nodded his head. So, Jin-seo also looked into the academy and registered him with excitement.

But after just one day, the child complained that it was boring. Today, he had burst into tears.

Jin-seo felt like crying too.

The tuition was a waste. She wished he would at least go for a month.

Jin-seo barely managed to calm her rising emotions and gently soothed Dobin with encouraging words.

“Son, just sit for 30 more minutes, okay? If you go and learn for 30 minutes, I’ll let you play a game for 30 minutes.”

“…An hour.”

“Okay. Go in quickly.”

Finally, with that sad condition attached, the child wiped his tears. Somehow, it felt a bit bittersweet.

Watching her son’s slumped shoulders as he opened the academy’s entrance door, Jin-seo let out a deep sigh.

She wanted to be a good mother.

Not necessarily a perfect one.

She believed her child would excel at everything. Before asking him to do anything, she thought he would handle it skillfully, and when she taught him one thing, he would naturally grasp two, three, or four. After all, he had been quite obedient before he could fully understand language.

But children do not grow according to expectations. They only want to do what they want, eat what they want, and moreover, how can a seven-year-old be so strong?

Even though her child was adorable, it was sometimes, no, often, exhausting.

Thus, she came to realize a painful truth that no one had told her.

To become a “good mother,” one essential thing was a “gentle child.”

Sniffle, sniffle. Ugh, ugh.

Despite the condition of getting to play games for an hour, Dobin was still sniffing.

Since the older elementary school kids were in their lesson time, everyone was in the classroom. There was another teacher nearby, but he was helping the older kids solve problems. Dobin felt abandoned.

He had to endure living like this for at least a month, but he couldn’t see how he could possibly manage. After all, he had to hold on for 30 minutes…

“Hey.”

At that moment, a girl sat down in front of the sniffing Dobin. He looked up to see her.

She was a pretty girl, with big eyes and a fair face, almost doll-like.

“Don’t cry; look at this.”

She looked like a little princess, yet her voice was as clear and lovely as one in a carol.

For some reason, she suddenly told him to look at the Go board.

Dobin stared at the Go board like a docile sheep. The girl placed her hand on the board like a maple leaf.

“Try this.”

Dobin followed the girl’s lead.

Suddenly, she began placing Go stones one by one on Dobin’s small hand.

He didn’t understand why she was doing that. Dobin, who had stopped crying, was flustered and asked, “What is this? Why are you doing that?”

“If you drop it, you’ll get a smack.”

The girl filled Dobin’s small hand with Go stones. It was like a flower with five white leaves blooming atop the black buds.

When the girl made the flower and giggled, Dobin completely forgot that he had been crying until then.

“My name is Lee Ye-na. What’s yours?”

“…Park Dobin.”

Even while answering, Dobin was tense, worried he might drop the Go stones. Ye-na asked again.

“Do you go to the Kkwekkori daycare?”

“How did you know?”

“I saw your bag yesterday.”

…Had she been watching him since yesterday?

Ye-na’s eyes, filled with laughter, sparkled like jewels.

The flower blooming on his hand seemed to float up to his heart.

Just as his tense arm was about to freeze, Ye-na released the stones she had placed on Dobin’s hand. It was like playing a game of freeze tag, and finally, Dobin could move his body.

As Ye-na removed the Go stones one by one, she explained, “Look. This is a white stone, and this is a black stone.”

“I know.”

“Do you want to play with the white stones or the black stones?”

“Black stones.”

Dobin answered all her questions as if he were enchanted by her. If she asked him, he felt like he could tell her his home address, as well as the names of his mom, dad, and younger sibling.

Ye-na nodded and brought the black stone bowl in front of Dobin and the white stone bowl in front of herself. Then she placed a white stone in the center of the Go board.

“Then I’ll put it here.”

“……”

“Do you know how to capture this?”

This question was difficult. However, he could easily recall his dad’s answer from a few days ago. Dobin surrounded the white stone with four black stones to block its path.

“Oh. You know how to play Go?”

As if his ordinary move was something amazing, Ye-na praised him. Dobin’s face turned as red as a rose. The flowers flowing into his heart began to form a bouquet.

She was a child with a floral scent.

“Why are you crying when you know how to play? Don’t cry.”

She said.

Seven-year-old Park Dobin had never met a girl like her in his life.

Outside the academy, Jin-seo waited anxiously for her son.

She had expected him to burst out after just 30 minutes, but he hadn’t come out for over 40 minutes.

‘Is he still crying the whole time?’

Eventually, Jin-seo opened the academy door and went inside.

“Dobin.”

“Mom!”

As Jin-seo saw her son, who was beaming with a bright smile, unlike when he entered the academy, she let out a sigh of relief. The teacher greeted Jin-seo with a pleased expression.

“Dobin’s mother, Dobin is adjusting very well.”

“Oh, really?”

That was the most heartwarming praise. She expressed her gratitude by hugging her son, who had rushed over to her side.

“Well then, teacher, I’ll be counting on you again tomorrow.”

“Yes, don’t worry.”

“Dobin should say goodbye.”

“Goodbye!”

Dobin politely said goodbye to the teacher and then shouted loudly into the practice room.

“Ye-na, goodbye!”

“Yeah, goodbye!”

A pretty girl waved her hand from inside the practice room.

‘He’s already made friends with his peers.’

Jin-seo felt a swell of pride at her son’s sociability.

Once outside the academy, Jin-seo asked Dobin, “How was the academy, son? Did you have fun?”

“Yeah! A lot!”

Dobin replied with an excited expression.

“What was the most fun part?”

Her smile felt joyful. Her voice sounded happy.

A mother couldn’t help but be unaware of this happiness.

After a while, Dobin, who couldn’t answer right away, asked another question.

“Mom, did you fall in love with Dad at first sight?”

“Where did you learn that?” Jin-seo asked, laughing lightly.

“Do you know what it means?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Because I’m experiencing it right now!

“Mom, I’m going to work hard at the Go academy!”

Dobin shouted with determination.

***

It was the beginning of a first love.

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After coming back from a field trip, Ji-heon sat down, furrowing his brow and gently closing his eyes.

A woman he had only briefly encountered kept lingering in his mind throughout the afternoon…

The new copywriter from Production Team 2.

What was her name again?

The woman who had looked at him with startled rabbit-like eyes on her pale face.

She was pretty, but merely being pretty didn’t fully explain the feelings she stirred in him.

Her eyes reflected various colors like dragonfly wings. It felt like those wings were fluttering precariously and had fallen into the water. The soaked wings looked heavy, as if they were barely breathing.

She was a woman holding on with all her might at that moment.

The impression she left in such a short time was very diverse.

It was a little, no, extremely…

Unpleasant.

Those mere dragonfly wings couldn’t possibly block the flowing water. Yet, it felt oddly uncomfortable and suffocating.

She was a woman who stirred strange feelings within him.

Knock, knock.

He heard a knock.

“Yes.”

At Ji-heon’s response, the door opened. Team Leader Sung Mi-ran, whom he had bumped into in the hallway that morning, entered with documents in hand. It was the preliminary budget request form and list of participants for the competitive PT they were participating in.

Among the names he remembered, one name stood out uncomfortably.

Lee Jung-o.

“Is the new team member in Team Sung a copywriter?” Ji-heon casually inquired about her while signing the documents.

Mi-ran answered.

“Yes, you mean Deputy Lee Jung-o, right?”

“Did she have a health checkup before joining?”

Mi-ran’s eyes widened, as if questioning why he was asking that. But she answered right away.

“I haven’t confirmed, but she probably had to undergo it as a requirement.”

“It’s just that she seemed to be about to collapse suddenly and was shaking when I caught her.”

“…”

“It seems like there might be a health issue.”

At Ji-heon’s comment, Mi-ran’s expression turned blank again.

‘Is he genuinely concerned about the employee?’

She had thought he was a cold and scary man, having not seen him smile even once in the week since his appointment. But perhaps that wasn’t entirely true.

“Is it because the director is too handsome?”

Mi-ran relaxed her stiff muscles and made a joke. She wanted to get along well with the new department head. It wasn’t out of a desire to align herself with him but rather a wish to enjoy her work.

“Do I seem like the type to enjoy flattery?”

However, his immediate retort was chilling.

Mi-ran pressed her lips together tightly. His sharp gaze felt like it could tear through the paper of the documents, making the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

“Bring Lee Jung-o.”

Mi-ran internally regretted bringing it up as she received this unfamiliar directive.

She stared at Ji-heon in surprise.

The department head had mentioned wanting to conduct personal interviews with employees of the same department. However, nothing had happened yet.

Was he going to start those interviews? Was Lee Jung-o, the newly transferred employee, going to be the first?

As a team leader, she wanted to know the purpose of this, even if only briefly, and opened her lips to ask again.

“What does it concern Lee Jung-o…”

“Bring her here.”

But Ji-heon cut her off without hesitation.

He had only one thought.

“I need to see her again. Right now.”

Ch6 - Crazy Jung Jiheon

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The first day at a new job was overwhelming enough, but Jung-oh was unsettled for a different reason.

By evening, though, she'd managed to get a little more comfortable with her team, easing some of her work-related tension.

"When sending work files, just drop them into the shared company folder. It's easy since you can just drag them over without going through annoying procedures."

The youngest team member, Song Ki-hoon, was kindly explaining the company's system to her.

"In my last job, we used the cloud, but here we have a dedicated folder system. I'm sure security is a concern."

"There's a record when files are uploaded or downloaded. There hasn't been a security issue, but if a review takes too long, it's a good idea to put a password on it."

"Thanks. I learned a lot from you today, Ki-hoon."

"Well, I've only been here three months, so that's all I know for now," Ki-hoon said, smiling sheepishly. It was a pleasant smile, the kind you only see on people who live with a bright and upright outlook.

It was nearing the end of the workday. Since the team leader had promised not to make her work overtime on her first day, she'd likely get to leave on time.

She’d think about it more at home—whether she’d stay at this job or give it up.

Just then, team leader Sung Mi-ran, who had briefly stepped out, returned with a thunderbolt of news.

“Jung-oh, Director Jung Jiheon wants to see you for a bit.”

“…Pardon?”

Jung-oh froze at Mi-ran’s announcement.

“Go ahead to the director’s office.”

“…”

“No, I’ll come with you.”

Seeing Jung-oh’s face turn pale in an instant, Mi-ran, who had been about to sit down, gestured for her to come along. She figured Jung-oh was overly nervous.

Jung-oh had no choice but to follow Mi-ran.

Her heart began to pound wildly again.

Why on earth…?

He pretended not to recognize me earlier, and now he suddenly wants to? Why? Is he going to tell me to quit? Does he want me to step aside so I don’t interfere in his life?

With each step, her mind filled with endless questions.

It felt like he was scheming to quietly make her quit.

But that would be a problem because it seemed like the team leader was planning to accompany her.

“Team Leader, it’s okay. I can go by myself.”

A part of her wanted to cling to Mi-ran, hoping to throw Jiheon off balance and prevent him from kicking her out of the company, but she spoke calmly.

She was curious about what Jiheon would say once they were alone. She felt a twinge of fear, yet knew that if she stayed at this company, she’d eventually have to face him.

“No, I’ll come with you,” Mi-ran replied with a firm look.

“Be careful. He didn’t look in a good mood.”

“What?”

“Director Jung Jiheon. He’s in a completely foul mood.”

Mi-ran let out a rough sigh and gritted her teeth, muttering to herself.

“I just said he was handsome. How is that an insult?”

“Pardon?”

“It was just a compliment.”

“…”

“It’s not like I was hitting on him or anything. I was just trying to get on his good side, and he got all offended. Is that really something to be criticized for?”

Crazy Jung Jiheon

Miran mumbled quietly, “He’s so much younger…”

Jung-oh couldn’t bring herself to ask Miran about what happened in the director’s office. The only thing on her mind was Miran’s mention that Jung Jiheon seemed to be in a bad mood.

She wanted to just run away.

Should I just turn around, pack up, and go home?

Maybe I should go back to my old job and beg them to take me back?

Weighed down by countless thoughts, Jung-oh finally reached the director's office.

Knock knock.

"Yes."

Jiheon's voice came from inside in response to Miran's knock.

Jung-oh's stomach churned.

The door opened indifferently.

Once again, she found herself facing him.

Even after calling someone in, his gaze was chillingly indifferent.

Jung Jiheon looked much the same as he had a few hours earlier.

"Director, I brought Deputy Manager Lee Jung-oh," Miran introduced her.

Jiheon repeated her name as if to confirm it.

"Deputy Manager Lee Jung-oh."

Hearing him say her name felt foreign and cold.

It was like standing in a silent, sunless winter at the farthest point on earth.

When you used to say my name, I loved the warmth in your voice so much that it made me love my own name.

But that was seven years ago, a distant memory.

“Yes.”

Jung-oh managed to respond, her voice barely audible.

But the question that followed took her by surprise.

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Pardon?”

“You looked unwell when I passed by earlier.”

Jung-oh stared at him with wide eyes, unable to understand his intention.

It seemed bringing Miran along had been a mistake. If she’d come alone, she might have gotten to the bottom of his true intentions. Now, with Miran here, he was asking absurd questions to maintain a facade.

Jung-oh quickly grasped the hidden meaning in his question and was about to answer, but Jiheon spoke first.

“You left Sang-ah Planning to join Max Planning.”

“…”

“You weren’t disappointed it wasn’t the company you’d originally applied to, I hope. Max Planning should be superior in every way.”

His tone was impeccably courteous, yet somehow it felt arrogant, as if he were mocking her.

It was as if he was saying, You’re lucky to be here.

It felt like his unspoken words were ringing in her ears.

“Will you be able to handle the work?”

“…Yes.”

“As a copywriter, I expected a more thoughtful answer.”

It was a sarcastic comment, implying all she could say was “yes.”

It seemed her short response had struck a nerve.

Jung-oh stared at him in disbelief.

She felt like he was pressing down on her with his words.

It was as if he was trying to make her feel just how insignificant she was.

What do you expect me to say here, huh?

Do you want me to tell you myself that I’m fine with everything?

Do you want me to promise that I’ll focus solely on my work and ignore the past? Is that what you want?

Miran, who had been nervously watching their strange tension, gently took hold of Jung-oh’s arm.

It was her way of saying they should quickly wrap up and leave.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Jung-oh spoke again.

“It will be different when I’m working. I’ll do my best.”

“Do so. I’ll be watching.”

Something about his words, that he’d be “watching,” sent a shiver down her spine.

Was he saying he’d watch her work or her every move?

“Deputy Lee will be involved in this competitive PT project, as you’re aware. I’ll encourage her to achieve good results,” Miran interjected, trying to ease the awkward situation.

“Yes, I’ll look forward to it,” Jiheon replied, showing no interest in prolonging the conversation.

Outside the office, after leaving with Miran, Jung-oh heaved a deep sigh internally.

He was no longer the Jung Jiheon she once knew.

Or perhaps the Jung Jiheon I knew back then was the fake.

She felt miserable.

She thought the wounds from back then had healed, but the old despair was coming back to life vividly.

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After Jung-oh and Miran left, Jiheon fell into thought. His scalp tingled. His mood still hadn’t improved.

Lee Jung-oh, the copywriter.

Even though she politely responded with a “yes,” her gaze had been defiant, yet it still had that trembling, dragonfly-wing quality.

It felt as if she didn’t want to talk to him or even face him.

Did she think of him as some sort of zombie or vampire? Perhaps even something like a contagious disease?

Surely there are plenty of people who find me difficult to deal with.

Even though it wasn’t hard to understand, he couldn’t shake his lingering thoughts.

Knock knock.

When Jiheon sat back down in silence, he heard another knock. He gave a short reply, and the door clicked open.

“Director?”

The person poking his head in was Deputy Manager Park Seung-gyu from the HR department.

High school and college friend, former senior in the military—Park Seung-gyu.

Jiheon, who had been lost in thought with a hardened expression, relaxed a little.

He and Seung-gyu had never been in the same class after their first year of high school. They’d only heard through the grapevine that they went to the same college, so they hadn’t been close.

The two became closer when Jiheon was assigned to the squad Seung-gyu was serving in. Seung-gyu looked after the quiet Jiheon well, and Jiheon found it easier to be around him than others.

Of course, Jiheon doesn’t remember his time in the military now.

Even with his three-year memory gap, Jiheon and Seung-gyu remained close. Seung-gyu, who was easygoing and open-minded, was someone Jiheon greatly needed.

Jiheon addressed Seung-gyu, who had entered the office.

“It’s just the two of us. Speak comfortably.”

It had been exactly a week since Jiheon was assigned to Max Planning. Even though they were in the same group, they’d never crossed paths since they were in different companies. But now, they would be seeing each other every day.

With a mix of relief and a touch of burden, Seung-gyu let his true feelings slip.

“I’m not used to it yet. You feel distant. Director.”

“Want me to move your desk to the annex so you can adapt faster?”

“Are you serious?”

When Seung-gyu gasped, Jiheon chuckled.

Seung-gyu raised his voice.

“Oh, hey! You’re giving me goosebumps. Don’t say silly things. When you say it, everything sounds serious.”

“Are you afraid of what I say?”

“Yes! Even asking like that is scary.”

“Scary, huh…”

Jiheon looked deeply reflective, repeating the word as if to himself, and his expression seemed unusually intense. Watching him closely, Seung-gyu asked,

“What happened? Is something wrong?”

After a pause, Jiheon spoke.

“A new employee joined us. Someone who’d first joined Sang-ah Planning.”

“Yeah, I know. A female deputy manager. She’s a copywriter, right? What about her?”

“She turned pale when she saw me.”

“Isn’t that normal? You’re always making people pale.”

Seung-gyu shot back immediately, only to pause after a moment.

So his eyes were drawn to her face…

That was rare. For Jung Jiheon.

“…Is she pretty?” Seung-gyu squinted his eyes and asked with a mischievous grin.

Jiheon, not wanting to indulge his friend’s teasing, turned away and began organizing his desk.

Seung-gyu changed the topic.

“Ready to head out?”

“Yeah.”

“Got any plans for dinner? If not, want to come over to my place?”

“Why would I go there?”

“Your saintly mother told me to invite you over. She wants to show you what a happy family looks like so you’ll hurry up and get married…”

“Why bother listening to that seriously? Just pretend to pay attention.”

Jiheon cut him off, making it clear he didn’t want to hear any more. Seung-gyu stayed silent, unable to continue.

A life where you only had to pretend.

A life where you found a compromise at the right point, never giving it your all.

A life where all you had to do was keep your place quietly.

That was Jiheon’s past, present, and future.

Even with a three-year gap in his memory, it wasn’t a life he felt sorry for.

Such a dull life.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Having left work early, Jiheon skipped dinner and swallowed down some medicine.

Lying stretched out on the sofa, Jiheon stared blankly at the white pill bottle he had placed on the table. Once again, the image of that woman's pale face surfaced in his mind.

"She was called Lee Jeong-oh, wasn't she? That woman."

It was a strange thing.

"She's not even my type, so why…?"

Somewhere along the line, Jiheon had begun to be drawn to women with long hair. He would instinctively turn his head whenever he saw a woman with long, straight hair; that's how Jiheon came to understand his own preference.

But why?

Why was he so conscious of a woman who didn't have long hair?

"Is it because of her name?"

Jiheon reconsidered.

Maybe that was it.

He had a peculiar fixation with the time 12:00 noon.

Whenever he glanced at the clock and saw "12:00," that precise, even number, his chest would tighten for some inexplicable reason.

12:00 noon. Jeong-oh.

That was her name.

“Lee Jeong-oh. Lee Jeong-oh…”

The sound of her name lingered on his tongue. It was a warm name, like sunlight streaming in at noon, yet it seemed both fitting and unfitting for her.

Had he ever thought about a woman he’d only briefly met this intensely…?

By the time he finally lowered his voice as if letting go of the name he’d been repeating obsessively, he heard a beeping sound.

Beep, beep, beep, beep.

Someone was entering the passcode at his front door.

Who could it be? Who knew his door code?

Before he could even try to figure it out, the door opened.

And the person who appeared was none other than that woman.

Lee Jeong-oh.

Startled, Jiheon sat up.

“How did you…?”

He was so taken aback that his voice faltered.

She approached him, her face pale as if frightened, her wide eyes just as they had been when she left his office—her neat attire trembling slightly.

“What are you doing here?”

How did she know the passcode? Why was she here? What was she doing?

This was a trespass. He should call the police, but—

Before Jiheon could get up from the sofa, she grabbed his arm first.

She was so delicate that he could have easily restrained her with one hand, yet, oddly enough, he couldn’t move.

In fact, as she held onto him, he began to feel nervous.

He didn’t understand what was happening to his body.

Her hand that held his arm slid up slowly. Despite her innocent face, her touch was anything but.

It was an oddly soft touch, as if out of place. The way her hand caressed his neck was as warm as noon sunlight.

Her breath, so close, felt even warmer, making him imagine her body heat.

He had no idea why she was doing this, but he didn’t want to stop her.

Or perhaps he had already anticipated what would come next.

She tilted her head, and as if on cue, Jiheon’s lips parted.

Her breath crossed into him with a gulp. Even though he swallowed her breath, it felt as if he’d given up a part of himself.

All his senses became vividly attuned to her.

But the moment didn’t last long. She quickly pulled back.

Jiheon frowned.

The lips that had barely touched his, only to leave behind warmth and then retreat, felt frustratingly distant.

Despite having done something so bold, her expression remained the same. That innocent face sparked an odd anger in him.

Eyes trembling like dragonfly wings, as if she might cry at any moment. Quivering as if she would flutter away.

Desire was more fearsome and weightier than reason.

He had to hold onto her. He had to have her.

He couldn’t let her go.

This time, he grabbed her as she turned to leave, pulling her down onto the sofa where he’d been lying.

Thud!

As Jiheon fell from the sofa, he opened his eyes.

His back arched up, then fell back with a thud.

Gasp, gasp.

His shoulder throbbed from the impact, but the pain in his head was worse, leaving him gasping for breath.

Gasping heavily… still struggling to calm his breathing and heart rate.

Gasp, gasp…

Where did she go?

Just moments ago, she’d been right in front of him, but it felt as if the void had swallowed her.

He could still feel her shallow breaths inside him.

…Jung Jiheon, you’re out of your mind.

It was a disturbingly vivid dream.

“Why on earth…?”

Ch7 - My Princess

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I don’t know how today passed.

For Jeong-oh, it was a painful day that made her feel sick.

But despite that, the fact that it could end happily was because she had a cozy home and her precious family.

On days she finished early, she would go to Guksun’s restaurant to help with the closing, but today, Guksun had closed the restaurant early herself.

As Jeong-oh entered through the front door, her daughter came running over, as lively as a little puppy.

“Mommy!”

“Yena, my princess!”

My princess who fills the universe with beauty and cuteness!

The energy that had drained from Jeong-oh completely recharged with her daughter. She easily lifted Yena, who had run to her.

“You didn’t work late today?”

Guksun came into the living room, wiping her hands on her pants.

“No. It’s the first day, after all.”

With a kiss on Yena’s cheek, Jeong-oh answered Guksun.

I’m happy like this.

Jiheon, you can’t ruin this.

At one point, her life had been a hell, but now it had become heaven.

When she thought she’d lost love, a greater love had come into her life. The love that her daughter Yena had taught her gave her the strength to keep going.

Because of that, she couldn’t simply hate and resent Jiheon.

All she could hope for was that this heaven wouldn’t be destroyed.

Around 9 p.m., Jeong-oh spread out bedding and lay down next to Yena. It was time for children to visit the land of dreams.

Turning off the light in the room, she offered her arm as a pillow for Yena, but her energetic seven-year-old wasn’t about to fall asleep easily. Yena giggled and teased her repeatedly until, after several warnings, she finally lay still.

Blinking her eyes, Yena softly called out to her mother.

“Mom, I met another seven-year-old at the academy today.”

“You made a friend!”

“Not a friend yet. He doesn’t know anything about Go.”

“You can still be friends even if he doesn’t know Go. You could teach him, and one day he might get as good as you.”

“He cried a lot, saying he didn’t want to learn.”

“Well, maybe one day he’ll like it.”

With a cheerful voice, Jeong-oh felt happy her daughter was meeting friends. But Yena pouted as if she didn’t believe her mother’s words.

“What’s your friend’s name?”

“Park Dobin.”

“A boy?”

“Yeah.”

Yena’s voice grew slower.

“His mom came today too, and she came yesterday too.”

“…”

“She’ll probably come tomorrow, too.”

Pretending to be sleepy, Yena’s tone revealed her hidden feelings, which Jeong-oh could sense.

“Were you jealous of Dobin?”

“No.”

“…”

“… Just a little.”

Her heart ached when her daughter showed her true feelings.

My princess.

She wanted to do everything for her, to give her everything she could, but there were limits with only one of her.

There were times she thought it would have been nice if Yena had a father.

Unfailingly, that thought led her to Jiheon.

“Doesn’t he know I had Yena? I thought he’d at least ask.”

The moment she thought of Jiheon, a large question mark formed in her mind.

“Does he just firmly believe that I would have given up my child?”

Regardless, even if he were to find out now, if he said nonsense about taking their daughter away, she wouldn’t let it happen.

Thinking of Jiheon, she clenched her fists tightly.

But before long, she released her fist with a sigh.

What a cruel twist of fate this was.

Meeting the father of the child she’d raised in secret at work, and as a far superior boss, no less.

The man she met again after seven years still boasted a handsome face. His expression had grown colder, though.

“Did he have a lot of women?”

Of course, he must have.

He was always a man who loved women.

Before they dated—or even before their first kiss—he’d seemed like a man with no sexual desires, almost ascetic. But once they were alone, he was a different person.

In private, he was obsessive enough that it almost felt like he enjoyed tormenting her.

Whenever they spent a weekend together, he would act as though he wanted her all night long. She’d sometimes have to pretend to sleep when she grew too tired.

Day or night didn’t seem to matter to him.

Someone with such an appetite must have had countless women.

“He must have charmed so many women.”

And he must have erased someone like me in no time.

While his life flowed by smoothly, only she had been left unsettled, which filled her with sorrow.

A season that refused to leave still lingered within her heart.

“Should I quit the job after all?”

She didn’t want to let her emotions show.

But she didn’t want to be in a position of running away, either.

It was a deeply troubling night.

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The next morning.

Jiheon visited his family’s home.

Actually, he had planned to visit yesterday and spend the night, joining his parents for breakfast, but as he wasn’t feeling well, he only came by in the morning.

But his mood hadn’t improved just because it was morning. Last night, he’d had a strange dream and had been in a daze ever since, like he’d been possessed by a ghost.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling unwell?”

During breakfast, his mother, Jang Yeong-mi, noticed him repeatedly massaging his shoulders and asked.

He couldn’t exactly say he’d fallen off the couch at the age of thirty-three.

“I think I just slept wrong.”

Jiheon gave a vague answer.

“Be mindful of your demeanor in front of the staff. If you appear too uncomfortable, they might misunderstand.”

His father, Jeong Jaekwang, took the opportunity to offer advice.

“Yes.”

Jiheon answered briefly.

Meals with his parents weren’t exactly comfortable. His father was a stern man who only talked about work, and his mother was overly interested in his life. The conversation might even veer toward marriage, which would only make breakfast longer, so Jiheon kept quiet.

“How is the new job? Is it manageable?”

“It’s alright. I’ve just started learning everyone’s names.”

Jiheon’s curt answer to his father’s question prompted Yeong-mi to chime in.

“Honey, it’s only been a week since Jiheon joined the new company. Oh, isn’t Eun-bi also at that company…?”

“Father, where’s my brother?”

Sensing a tedious topic approaching, Jiheon quickly turned to Jaekwang with a question.

“He suddenly had to leave on a business trip.”

“It would have been nice to eat together. I guess he’s busy.”

Yeong-mi looked a bit disappointed, but Jiheon paid it no mind. After dodging the conversation deftly, Jiheon gave Yeong-mi a polite smile when

their eyes met.

The meal ended without incident.

Before heading to work, Jiheon went to his room and looked over the books he'd read as a child.

Coming to his parents' home always left him with a peculiar feeling. His early childhood memories were quite vivid, but the fact that he had no recollection whatsoever of the three years after he turned twenty-six weighed heavily on him here.

What kind of person was I back then? What was I thinking?

Not being able to remember made him cling to it all the more.

Just as he returned a book to its shelf, the door opened, and Yeong-mi entered.

Seeing her son, her face lit up, and she approached him.

"Do you have a bit of time this morning?"

"I should be leaving for work now."

Yeong-mi, who had been hoping for some quality time with her son, looked disappointed.

Jiheon called out to her.

"Mother."

"Yes?"

"During those three years when I lost my memory…"

As he began, a shadow crossed Yeong-mi's eyes.

The three years her son lost his memory — it was a topic she loathed.

“What might have happened?”

“You went to the military… other than that, everything was the same.”

She answered lightly, as if it were nothing, and Jiheon murmured to himself.

“So it was the military?”

Smiling awkwardly, she raised her hand to stroke his hair.

“If you remember nothing at all, maybe it means not to dwell on it.”

“But I feel like something must have happened.”

“…”

“I feel like I’ve forgotten something, but I don’t know what it is.”

“Do you remember this? You used to have a red birthmark here.”

Just as her son had done during breakfast, she also steered the conversation away from a burdensome topic.

For a long time, Jiheon had a salmon-colored birthmark on his forehead shaped like a flame. It’s said that these marks typically disappear before the age of three, but his had lasted much longer, only fading around the time he entered middle school.

“Yes, I remember. I kept my bangs down to cover it.”

Jiheon responded as if it were a trivial memory.

As if lost in nostalgia, Yeong-mi continued, brushing her hand over the spot where the birthmark had been.

“I used to be able to tell what you were feeling just by looking there. That mark showed everything.”

“…”

“It was like that back then.”

For Jiheon, it was an uncomfortable memory. The idea of others seeing through his emotions was unsettling. He disliked that the birthmark would flush red when he was in a bad mood.

Unaware of his inner thoughts, Yeong-mi smiled gently and wrapped up her reminiscing.

“Don’t worry too much about the things that happened seven years ago.”

As if he’d expended all his emotions back then, he felt as though he had nothing left now.

Still, Jiheon lived his life concealing his true feelings.

“Even so, if something difficult comes up, you can talk to me, alright?”

“Yes.”

“Love you, son. You’re everything to me.”

After a loose embrace, Jiheon said goodbye and left his parents’ home.

His gaze lost its warmth as he stepped off the stage of playing the dutiful son.

Jiheon let out a stifled breath and pressed hard on the gas pedal.

Though it was a bright morning, his mind didn’t feel clear. It was like there was an indelible soot clouding it.

Whether it was because he’d dredged up the memories of seven years ago or because of last night’s dream, he couldn’t tell.

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Meanwhile, in the pantry at Max Planning.

With hollow eyes, Jeong-oh brewed coffee.

She had only managed to fall asleep at dawn, debating whether to stay at her job or quit.

The conclusion she finally reached was to stick it out for now.

For now, she'd work hard. That was the best she could do. With a mother who had sacrificed her life for her, and a daughter who was growing fast, she couldn't afford to falter.

Since Jiheon was an executive, she wouldn't encounter him often. If she avoided him well, she might be able to last a few months. In the meantime, she'd prepare to switch jobs again.

Having decided on a course, she felt a bit lighter. Even her steps as she turned back with her coffee felt light.

But that feeling didn't last long. Jeong-oh suddenly froze in her tracks.

Following Jiheon's reappearance yesterday, another nemesis had shown up today.

The person looked at her with wide eyes and greeted her.

"Oh my, look who it is! You're Lee Jeong-oh, right? Do you remember who I am?"

Of course, there was no way she wouldn't remember.

She simply didn't want to.

The friend who had caused her the most tears during her school days — why was she here…

"I'm Chae Eun-bi. Don't you remember?"

“…Oh, yeah. …Eun-bi.”

“It’s really nice to see you, Jeong-oh! How have you been?”

We were never that close. But with Eun-bi speaking so warmly, Jeong-oh felt even more flustered.

“Oh, well, you know, so-so… Are you working at this company?”

“Yeah. I’m a copywriter.”

Eun-bi laughed as she answered Jeong-oh’s rather pointless question.

After all, it had already been ten years since high school, and since they were now meeting as colleagues, it wouldn’t make sense to bring up the past.

Besides, she couldn’t keep dwelling on things from the past, especially things that Eun-bi might have already forgotten.

Maybe I should just try to get along with her casually?

After all, it’s not like I’ll be at this company for long.

With a new resolution in mind, Jeong-oh was about to respond with a friendly tone when Eun-bi spoke up first.

“Now that I think about it, you’re the assistant manager who joined the neighboring team, right? Production Team 2?”

Eun-bi pursed her lips in a round shape, as if genuinely curious about Jeong-oh.

“Yes.”

“How many years have you been an assistant manager?”

“Just one.”

“Just one year? What have you been doing all this time?”

Just as she felt a chill run through her, Eun-bi’s rounded lips stretched into a long, twisted smile. It was an expression like a noblewoman addressing an insignificant subordinate, with a glint of satisfaction in her eyes.

“I’m a manager, you know.”

Ch8 - Finding Out He’s the Father of My Child

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For Lee Jeong-oh, Chae Eun-bi is a memory that simply cannot be erased.

Jeong-oh and Eun-bi were in the same class during their first year of high school.

During the first semester, Jeong-oh was a typical student who got along well with everyone.

Eun-bi was quite popular. She was always surrounded by friends, and laughter never ceased around her.

Everything about Eun-bi was always a topic of conversation. Her clothes, bags, shoes, makeup, even her stationery—everything was branded, and if someone showed interest, she would sometimes give it to them as a gift.

All of her friends had at least one item that had once belonged to Eun-bi.

People said that Eun-bi’s family was a family of lawyers, and since her mother was the PTA president, even the teachers often asked after her parents.

She was a friend who stood out in many ways. But it wasn’t that Jeong-oh envied her. Jeong-oh was a student who knew how to appreciate what she had.

In any case, they got along fine. During the first semester of their first year, there were no issues. Or perhaps, there might have been something that

Jeong-oh couldn’t recall, but it wasn’t something that threatened her school life.

Shortly after the midterms of the second semester, Eun-bi approached Jeong-oh warmly.

“Jeong-oh, would you like this? I’ve never used it.”

Eun-bi held out a lip gloss. The logo, shaped like two overlapping horseshoes, hinted at its high price. It was probably worth more than both Jeong-oh’s shoes and bag combined.

For a moment, she felt tempted to touch it, but Jeong-oh shook her head right away.

“No, I’m fine.”

“It would be nice to have one.”

“No, I don’t wear makeup, really. I’m fine.”

Jeong-oh couldn’t understand why Eun-bi was offering her such a gift. The gift, especially without a reason, felt more burdensome.

Even though Jeong-oh repeatedly declined, Eun-bi insisted once more.

“You’d look even prettier if you wore makeup. And besides, this is designer.”

“Really, I don’t need it, Eun-bi.”

In the empty classroom, afraid that her quiet voice might sound too serious, Jeong-oh carefully expressed her gratitude.

“Thanks for thinking of me, though. Sorry.”

Had her polite rejection offended Eun-bi? Her lips seemed to twist slightly.

After that conversation, Eun-bi never spoke to Jeong-oh again.

Afterward, Jeong-oh noticed that her classmates' attitudes toward her had changed.

It was a subtle exclusion, you might say? Friends who used to greet her warmly no longer smiled, and it became common for conversations to stop abruptly when she walked by. Eun-bi's close friends openly ignored her.

Even going to the cafeteria, Jeong-oh was alone. But being alone didn't feel particularly miserable.

Lunch and dinner times were actually her favorite parts of the day. Because, along with delicious food, someone she loved most in the world was waiting for her in the cafeteria.

Her mother, Lee Guk-sun.

Guk-sun had started working at the school cafeteria that summer. The company where she worked had been contracted to provide food for Jeong-oh's school.

Lunch and dinner must have been the most fulfilling times of the day for Guk-sun as well.

Jeong-oh was a lovely daughter who proudly appreciated her mother working in the cafeteria. Guk-sun tried to act as if she didn't know her daughter, fearing it would affect her, but Jeong-oh didn't feel the need to hide it.

"Thank you for the meal."

Mom.

The faintly whispered word, "Mom," made Guk-sun's lips curve up into a smile. They were tender toward each other, which made it hard for them to be truly unhappy.

Then, one day, an incident suddenly occurred.

At lunchtime, just as Jeong-oh arrived at the cafeteria, someone’s loud voice rang out.

Jeong-oh turned her head toward the noise.

The owner of the voice was none other than Chae Eun-bi. And the person standing across from her was none other than her mother, Guk-sun.

“Ma’am, how can you stick your hand in the soup bowl? That’s so unsanitary.”

It seemed Guk-sun had made a mistake while serving Eun-bi’s soup. Flustered, Guk-sun tried to take back the soup bowl.

“I’m sorry, it wasn’t on purpose…”

“Ahh!”

Just then, Eun-bi exaggeratedly dropped her tray and collapsed to the side.

Clang.

Crash.

Food splattered everywhere, and the cafeteria counter became a mess, with food spilling all over Eun-bi’s uniform and the floor.

“What’s going on?!”

The nutritionist rushed over.

One of Eun-bi’s friends helped her up and shouted fiercely.

“When I complained about this lady putting her fingers in Eun-bi’s soup, she shoved her.”

“No, student, that’s a misunderstanding,” Guk-sun protested.

“Apologize.”

Overcome with frustration, Guk-sun tried to explain, but Eun-bi silenced her with a firm voice.

The cafeteria fell silent.

“Ma’am, you shouldn’t act like that. If you’re an adult, act like one and apologize.”

At Eun-bi’s dignified yet assertive demand, Jeong-oh clenched her fists and hurriedly approached.

Recognizing her daughter’s intent, Guk-sun quickly bowed her head.

“I’m sorry.”

She waved her hand subtly so that no one else could see.

A signal meant for Jeong-oh.

Don’t come over here.

Rooted to the spot, Jeong-oh could only watch her mother from a distance.

Her hanging hand trembled violently.

Eun-bi’s hand was also shaking.

“If you’ve apologized, take responsibility.”

With those stern, wounded words, the cafeteria chilled once again.

“How are you going to take responsibility?”

Eun-bi’s harsh demand left Guk-sun unable to lift her head.

For a moment, Jeong-oh wanted to take her mother’s hand and leave the cafeteria, but she couldn’t do anything either.

Her tightly clenched knuckles turned white.

Due to that incident, Guk-sun faced intense scrutiny. In addition to her conflict with Eun-bi, she was falsely accused of not washing her hands before work, handling dishes and cooking utensils unsanitarily, and slacking off on the job. Unable to bear it, Guk-sun ultimately resigned from her position.

It was the best choice to prevent harm from reaching her daughter.

However, even after Guk-sun left her job, Jeong-oh had to battle numerous rumors about her mother.

“I heard her mom used to work at our school cafeteria? She purposely made the side dishes taste bad so students wouldn’t eat them, and then she took all the leftovers home for her daughter.”

“What? Cafeteria beggar?”

It wasn’t true. Guk-sun had only taken leftovers home after sharing her cooking tips with the nutritionist. That was all.

The only person who knew the truth was Chae Eun-bi.

Unable to hold back, Jeong-oh confronted Eun-bi.

“Eun-bi, you’re not spreading weird rumors about me, are you?”

“What are you talking about? Weird rumors?”

“When they came to investigate my mom’s work, you heard everything the inspectors said to her, didn’t you?”

“What… What are you saying? Why are you falsely accusing me?”

As Eun-bi raised her voice, other students gathered.

“Eun-bi, what’s wrong? What happened?”

Eun-bi, looking as if she might collapse at any moment, leaned on her friend’s shoulder.

Her friend supported her and glared at Jeong-oh.

In a trembling voice, Eun-bi addressed Jeong-oh.

“You may want to blame your mother quitting on me, but you shouldn’t do that.”

“Lee Jeong-oh. How could the perpetrator act like this to the victim?”

The friend supporting Eun-bi yelled sharply.

Jeong-oh could say nothing more. She knew that anything she added would only make things worse.

With clenched eyes, she turned away.

She had to endure it. If she crumbled, it would hurt her mother even more.

Thus, a label was stuck to Jeong-oh’s high school life, and no matter how hard she tried, it followed her for a long time.

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“Only one year? What were you even doing?”

“…”

“I’m a manager, you know.”

How should she respond to that question?

She took a break from college to have a child. It took a long time before she could return. By the time she started working as a new employee, her classmates had already been promoted to higher positions.

Although she had her reasons, she didn’t feel like sharing her story with Eun-bi.

“Oh, you’re a manager,” Jeong-oh nodded.

Eun-bi’s brows furrowed slightly, showing her displeasure.

“Yes. So please use formal language with me at work. You understand, right?”

Jeong-oh swallowed a bitter sigh.

“See you around. I guess we’ll be seeing each other often.”

Without waiting for a response, Eun-bi turned and walked out of the break room, her steps seeming lighter than when she’d entered.

Jeong-oh lamented her situation.

“First Jeong Ji-heon, now Chae Eun-bi.”

Two people from her past whom she never wanted to see again were now at the same company. And in roles she’d likely encounter often.

Ji-heon was the head of her department, and Eun-bi was on the team right next to hers.

It was like being trapped with nowhere to escape, facing one or the other.

Is this what they mean by “hell” in the workplace?

“I really need to leave this company soon. I need a new job.”

Lost in thought, she sighed deeply as she returned to her seat with a cup of tea. Just then, her phone vibrated. It was a message from the HR department.

– Assistant Manager Lee Jeong-oh, please come to HR to sign your salary contract.

Even if she planned to leave, she needed to check her salary. She was curious.

Since her new job’s salary would be part of her negotiation terms, she wanted to see if there were any changes in her contract, as she’d switched companies.

She headed straight to HR.

At the HR office entrance, a male employee greeted her. He had a kind expression.

“Hello, Assistant Manager Lee Jeong-oh. I’m Park Seung-gyu from HR.”

“Yes, hello.”

“There’s been a slight change in your salary, which you may not have heard about.”

“A change?”

Jeong-oh’s gaze turned sharp. She already felt wronged for having to switch companies, and if her salary had been cut, she wouldn’t be able to stay. She wouldn’t yield even 100,000 won from the agreed amount.

“It’s been adjusted upwards. We included this year’s salary increase in the contract terms.”

“Oh.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“Yes, absolutely. Do I just sign here?”

After confirming her salary, Jeong-oh was thrilled. The adjusted amount was 3 million won higher than her initial agreement.

With a fuller wallet, she felt her heart lighten as well.

“This company might be worth staying at. The location’s convenient, too.”

She was quickly won over by that 3 million won.

“And please fill out your personal details as well.”

After signing, Seung-gyu handed her another document. It was a personnel form for HR records. It asked for her home address, contact information, alma mater, and marital status.

Surprisingly, there was no section for family relations.

“Um, about this…”

“Yes, is there an issue?”

“No, it’s fine.”

She considered asking about the missing family details but kept silent.

She didn’t want to reveal her family situation.

If Jeong Ji-heon didn’t know about Yena yet, she wanted to keep it that way.

Maybe he already knew and was just pretending not to. Perhaps what he wanted to say in his office yesterday was just a reminder to avoid causing any trouble. A reminder to stay quiet and out of sight.

For a peaceful work life, it would be best to keep a low profile. Without hesitation, she filled out the form.

For marital status, she checked “single.” She had never been married, so she wasn’t lying about anything.

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The morning passed quickly with all the introductions. Just before lunchtime, Mi-ran called her over.

“Assistant Manager Lee Jeong-oh.”

“Yes?”

“Come here for a second.”

Mi-ran got up from her seat and, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, led her to a more secluded spot.

What was she going to say? Had Ji-heon revealed her past? Or did she find out that she was a single mother? Or maybe Eun-bi had said something strange about her?

With so many possibilities running through her mind, she stayed silent, swallowing nervously. But then…

“Do you like jjajangmyeon?”

Huh?

“Jjajangmyeon. Black bean noodles.”

It was an unexpected question.

Jjajangmyeon. She had never disliked it.

“Yes, I like it.”

“Great.”

Mi-ran’s previously serious expression brightened.

She showed her the screen on her phone. There was a map of nearby places on display.

“This is a place that makes really good jjajangmyeon. It’s a Chinese restaurant all our team members love, and you’ll like it too. But if we don’t reserve seats by 11:50, we’ll have to wait 40 minutes.”

“…”

“Slip out at 11:40 and save a table for five.”

That was Mi-ran’s request.

The most important thing for an office worker: securing a lunch spot.

“Originally, this was something we should have had Song Gi-hoon do, but I’m asking you because when a new face comes, the boss tends to give us better service.”

“…”

“Don’t tell anyone else. We need to keep this to ourselves.”

Somehow, this team seemed really lovable!

Could she really quit this company?

The determination Jeong-oh had to switch jobs suddenly wavered.

“Yes. Got it.”

Jeong-oh replied bravely, her eyes sparkling like a general preparing for battle.

Ten minutes later, at 11:40, Jeong-oh quietly got up from her seat for her mission.

For some reason, the elevator was stuck on the same floor, and Jeong-oh anxiously tapped her foot.

Then, she heard a commotion near the elevator.

I can’t get caught, so I should hide.

Fully committed to her mission, Jeong-oh concealed herself behind a large flowerpot.

A group of small children approached the elevator. They looked to be around Yena’s age, about six or seven years old.

And leading them was Jeong Ji-heon.

Jeong-oh's heart raced at the sight of him as she moved toward her lunch mission.

She remembered seeing a notice about children from a nearby daycare visiting the company for a lecture.

She hadn't expected Ji-heon to participate in such an event. It was surprising.

His gaze toward the children appeared quite gentle.

"Thank you so much for today. I think it was a beneficial time for the kids."

"I was happy to meet you too. I hope it was a good experience."

Ji-heon politely responded to the guide's greeting.

"And this…"

The guide handed over a heavy paper bag.

"It's just a small token, but we baked some cookies. Our kids spent all day making them yesterday. We chose only the prettiest shapes and packed them nicely. They made them with a pastry chef, so they should taste good. Please share them with the staff."

"Thank you. I'll enjoy them."

"There's also a card written by the kids inside."

"Yes. Thank you."

Ji-heon graciously accepted the gift, bowing again. The children and the guide got on the elevator that had just arrived.

Jeong-oh stayed hidden behind the flowerpot, waiting for Ji-heon to leave first.

However, Ji-heon didn’t leave right away.

Suddenly, he approached the trash can and dropped the gift bag he had received from the guide into it.

What?!

“No!”

Jeong-oh sprang from behind the flowerpot and grabbed Ji-heon’s arm.

But the large trash can had already swallowed the gift bag.

Ji-heon, who had discarded the present without a moment’s hesitation, looked startled.

Jeong-oh’s voice trembled with barely contained resentment.

“How could you throw that away?”

The children had made it themselves. They spent the whole day yesterday preparing it. They selected only the prettiest shapes, and there was a card inside.

It wasn’t given to him to eat alone; it was for sharing with the staff.

How could he just throw it away? Huh?

Once, the Ji-heon she knew had cherished even a single tangerine she had secretly tucked into his pocket.

Was that just an act too?

Was he that kind of person?

The man she once loved, the father of her child.

It turned out to be a shiny façade hiding a worthless man.

She glared at him, wanting nothing more than to slap him across the face.

But that moment of confrontation was interrupted once again.

His gaze, which had been wavering while looking at her, suddenly sharpened. It was easy for him to twist his arm free from her grasp.

As his hand slid down, it brushed over Jeong-oh’s hand, almost cradling it.

In stark contrast to the tension, the movement was smooth, like someone wanting to share warmth.

When she felt that warmth, she was already caught by his grip around her wrist.

Jeong-oh was taken aback by the large hand holding her own.

A voice stuck in her throat came out.

“What is this…?!”

Ch9 - He Spoke Informally to Me

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As Jeong-oh approached, Ji-heon was immobilized by the woman who suddenly appeared, as if she had fallen from the sky, grabbing his wrist.

He completely forgot what he was doing.

His body felt strange. His emotions were off-kilter.

A name that felt as hot as the midday sun. A name that burned with heat: Lee Jeong-oh. Once again, it was her.

She had an expression that was both provocative and resigned, as if she had just come from somewhere in his dreams.

That was all.

“How could you throw that away?”

She was merely blaming him, yet just the fact that she was in front of him made Ji-heon want to pull her waist toward him, regardless of where they were.

He wanted to tug at the neatly fastened buttons of her blouse. He wanted to see the curves that were hidden beneath. He wanted to touch the white skin inside her sleeves.

He wanted to consume everything about her.

Was he going crazy? Was he really losing his mind?

It was an unusual impulse he had never felt before.

It must be all because of that damned dream.

Ji-heon resisted the strange feelings and twisted his arm to pull his hand free from hers. He didn't understand why his movements were slow when he could have roughly shaken her off.

He rotated his hand smoothly and caught her slender wrist, just as she had done.

He reversed the situation effortlessly.

Her flustered expression intrigued him.

And then?

He looked down at her, as if searching her out, and spoke.

"Let's talk."

Now what would she do?

"U-uh!"

At that moment, the elevator doors opened, and a man shouted. It was his friend, Park Seung-kyu from the HR team.

As soon as he got off the elevator and witnessed the shocking scene, Seung-kyu was rendered speechless, pointing at the two of them with his finger and just flapping his mouth.

His friend was holding the wrist of a new female employee. A director at the company. The head of a department.

"Director! What are you doing here!"

Once he regained his senses, he shouted loudly, causing Ji-heon to release Jeong-oh's hand.

What on earth were they doing like that?

Yesterday, Ji-heon had talked to him about Lee Jeong-oh, mentioning her pale face.

Seung-kyu had jokingly asked if she was pretty, but it hadn’t been a serious question.

But this situation was no laughing matter.

What should he do now? Confront Ji-heon?

Ask about what happened with Lee Jeong-oh?

“Lee Jeong-oh!”

Seung-kyu brightened his expression and stepped closer to Jeong-oh.

“I was on my way to find you, Director. I had something I wanted to tell you earlier.”

He subtly gestured to Ji-heon and hurriedly led Jeong-oh somewhere else.

After guiding her into a quiet conference room, Seung-kyu carefully closed the door and asked earnestly.

“May I ask if something happened?”

“…”

“You can tell me the truth.”

Jeong-oh hesitated before quietly speaking up.

“You know those kids who came to the company today? The director received gifts from them, but as soon as the kids left, he threw them away.”

Oh my god… Seung-kyu put his hand to his forehead.

“So, you ended up grabbing the director’s wrist to stop him from doing that…”

“And yet, it turned out that I was the one caught.”

“Yes.”

“He really messed up.”

As Seung-kyu criticized Ji-heon, she made a blank expression.

He felt relieved, realizing that she was a decent person.

“I’ll make him apologize to you.”

“You don’t have to. He should apologize to the kids… And thinking about it, I guess it was my nosiness too.”

She really was a good person.

He felt sorry for her, who bowed her head in embarrassment, thinking she had interfered unnecessarily.

Affected by her emotions, Seung-kyu added, “Director, this is a bit personal, but actually, I’ve known Ji-heon for 16 years. Although our esteemed director probably doesn’t remember properly.”

“…”

“So I can afford to say a few harsh words. I still have the guts to do that, for now.”

Jeong-oh lifted her head, which had been deeply bowed.

If he’s known him for 16 years, he must know the Ji-heon from seven years ago.

‘Then he might recognize me too, right?’

However, she couldn’t read any hint of recognition in Park Seung-kyu’s eyes. The earlier question was also ambiguous.

Ji-heon hadn’t even mentioned Jeong-oh to his close friend.

“If Ji-heon—no, if Director Ji does something weird again, come find me. I’ll take the lead on the complaint, I promise.”

Jeong-oh slowly nodded. It felt like a heavy lump of sorrow was pressing down on her chest.

“But it seems like you’re going to have an early lunch today?”

Oh, right! Jajangmyeon!

Only then did Jeong-oh remember her forgotten mission.

“Then I’ll be going!”

She hurriedly bowed and stepped outside.

After Jeong-oh left, Seung-kyu also exited the conference room and quickly headed to Ji-heon’s office.

Fortunately, Ji-heon was in his office.

“Hey! My heart just sank!”

As soon as Seung-kyu saw Ji-heon, he shouted.

“You’re going to get in big trouble! How could you hold a female employee’s wrist? Even if you get caught or tied up, you shouldn’t grab a female employee’s wrist!”

“That woman—”

“Not ‘that woman’! It’s Lee Jeong-oh! Watch your words.”

Seung-kyu’s voice rose as he realized his friend still didn’t understand.

“She spoke informally to me.”

“…You grabbed her wrist because she spoke informally?”

Oh, this guy is unbelievable.

At least it seemed that Jeong-oh didn’t harbor any ill intentions, so maybe that was a relief?

This ridiculous guy had found a match in a woman just as absurd as he was.

It felt a bit absurd.

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Jeong-oh hurriedly ran to the Chinese restaurant that Team Leader Seung-mi mentioned.

She was supposed to arrive by 11:50, but it was already 11:53. The restaurant was already crowded with people.

Just then, someone called out to her.

“Lee Jeong-oh! Over here!”

Employee Song Gi-hoon from her team waved with a bright smile.

Jeong-oh walked in the direction Gi-hoon was gesturing.

As she entered the restaurant corridor, she found a room set for five.

“How come you’re here, Gi-hoon?”

“The team leader told me to go as well. I sneaked down the stairs to get here.”

Our team leader is really serious about jajangmyeon!

Feeling embarrassed for not fulfilling her task properly, Jeong-oh was relieved by Mi-ran’s obsession with jajangmyeon.

“Oh, thank goodness!”

Jeong-oh sat down and sighed in relief.

“Wait, you wore white today, Director?”

Gi-hoon, who had been quietly observing Jeong-oh, got up again and brought an apron from somewhere.

“Everyone else wore black today. We came here dressed for that.”

“Oh.”

“Every second Wednesday of the month is black. Remember that, Director.”

When Jeong-oh tied the apron around her neck, the other team members arrived. Just as Gi-hoon said, everyone was dressed in black except her.

“Team Leader, didn’t you tell this Director about the dress code?” Gi-hoon asked Mi-ran.

“If this Director said she doesn’t like jajangmyeon, we were going to go somewhere else.”

Her voice carried a hint of sincerity.

As Mi-ran sat down, she turned to Jeong-oh and asked, “Director, was there something going on with Director Ji-heon? It looked like you were talking in front of the elevator earlier.”

Although Mi-ran spoke casually, she had actually witnessed almost everything. She had seen through the glass door as she passed by in the corridor.

Jeong-oh had grabbed Ji-heon’s wrist, then he had grabbed hers, and then HR Team Leader Park Seung-kyu took Jeong-oh away.

It felt like something had gone wrong, so she hurriedly sent Gi-hoon to the Chinese restaurant first.

“Um, it was just a bit of a conflict over the trash. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“Why? Does he just throw trash around carelessly?”

Go Eun-joo, another employee, turned her head and asked while looking at her face in a handheld mirror.

Jeong-oh couldn’t answer clearly and awkwardly nodded.

“I just had a feeling it might be like that.”

Eun-joo snorted dismissively.

“It really looked unpleasant.”

Did Ji-heon really seem unpleasant? Could someone actually think that upon seeing his handsome face? Jeong-oh’s eyes widened in curiosity at Eun-joo’s reaction.

Go Eun-joo, whom she had observed for a whole day, was someone with high self-esteem. Others called her “Princess Eun-joo.”

Some seemed to be teasing her with her name, but Eun-joo didn’t seem to mind that attention. She didn’t dislike being treated like a princess by others.

Mi-ran said to Eun-joo, “But he is good-looking.”

“Looks and character are separate. I don’t even consider a man who doesn’t treat me well to be a man. He’s just a superior. If he weren’t a superior, he wouldn’t be worth dealing with.”

Eun-joo rebutted Mi-ran’s opinion without hesitation.

“No one can harm my dignity.”

Eun-joo's argument somehow seemed persuasive, and Jeong-oh nodded vigorously.

Right. Everyone is dignified, yet Ji-heon threw away the cookies that the children had made for him, along with the card they had given.

"That's right. Everyone is dignified."

"No. I'm the only one who is dignified."

However, Eun-joo rebutted Jeong-oh's agreement.

Eun-joo arrogantly tilted her head and said, "What others think doesn't matter. As long as I'm dignified, that's all that counts."

Ah. So Go Eun-joo is that kind of person.

She's impressive. Why is she so cool?

Jeong-oh admired Eun-joo's boldness.

The other team members laughed cheerfully at Eun-joo's words. Meanwhile, Eun-joo maintained her aloof expression.

Jeong-oh was gradually getting a sense of her team members' personalities: Team Leader Seung-mi was thoughtful and responsible, Deputy Park Young-kwang was quiet and diligent, Go Eun-joo was proud, picky, and confident, and Song Gi-hoon was cheerful, kind, and polite.

Just yesterday, Jeong-oh had thought that working at the company wouldn't be easy, but today her mindset had changed significantly.

She felt lucky to have met such good team members, enough to look forward to future collaborations.

The only concerns were Director Ji-heon and Manager Chae Eun-bi.

'Oh, I don't care anymore. I'll just live my life as it comes.'

Inspired by Eun-joo’s assertions, Jeong-oh thought to herself.

Team Leader Seung-mi and her team were so serious about the dress code because the jajangmyeon was delicious. Now that she knew a good restaurant, Jeong-oh didn’t want to quit her job even more.

Just then, Mi-ran approached her and cautiously spoke.

“Director Lee.”

“Yes, Team Leader.”

“Was it serious with the Director?”

Jeong-oh blinked. She wasn’t sure what exactly Mi-ran was asking, so she couldn’t answer carelessly.

“Actually, I saw it while passing by. You were holding the Director’s arm.”

Ah. Jeong-oh secretly breathed a sigh of relief.

“Well, you see…”

Jeong-oh explained the whole situation to Mi-ran: how Ji-heon had seen off the children on a field trip, how the children’s supervising teacher had given him cookie gifts, and how Ji-heon had thrown them away without hesitation as soon as the kids left.

Mi-ran contemplated the situation with a thoughtful expression.

“I don’t want to apologize for that. Of course, I was rude, but the Director shouldn’t have done that.”

“Still, the feedback in the group isn’t too bad. He might be an okay boss once you get to know him.”

“He might be a boss, but I don’t think he can be a leader.”

“Wow, you have quite the personality, Director Lee.”

Mi-ran responded with a smile, as if she didn’t particularly mind.

Then, in a more extended tone, as if it were a sensitive subject, she continued, “I don’t particularly want to defend the Director, but the truth is, he has different circumstances than us.”

“What circumstances?” Jeong-oh asked.

“He’s been a hit-and-run victim before.”

Jeong-oh’s steps came to an abrupt halt in the corridor.

Mi-ran continued to stand there, speaking.

“It seems like the group has been hush-hush about it. It happened about seven years ago, and it must have been serious back then.”

A hit-and-run accident? Seven years ago?

Jeong-oh felt a sudden tightness in her chest, as if she were the one who had been in an accident.

“I only heard about it by chance, but apparently, he suffered a brain injury in a traffic accident seven years ago and developed amnesia.”

“…Amnesia?”

Jeong-oh asked in a trembling voice.

Ch10 - Your baby has been born.

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“…Amnesia?”

Mi-ran nodded.

“Yeah. He lost memories from that period, about three years or so. Apparently, he even forgot that he had just returned from military service before that.”

“…”

“Maybe that incident made his personality more sensitive?”

Jeong-oh remembered the first time she met Ji-heon, back when she was in Australia on a working holiday seven years ago. Ji-heon had just returned from military service, with his hair sticking up like a chestnut burr.

A chill ran up her spine, as if something heavy had struck her head.

“The cookie gift is the same. No matter how much it’s a present from kids, isn’t it hard to trust food made by someone you don’t know? If you’re in a position of fear about what risks there might be, you might end up throwing it away.”

“…”

“Of course, throwing away the card was too much, though.”

Jeong-oh didn’t say anything, so Mi-ran cautiously shared her opinion.

Jeong-oh was too shocked to speak.

It felt as though her brain, which usually thought flexibly, had momentarily frozen.

After a moment, Jeong-oh managed to open her mouth again.

“Team Leader, do you know exactly when it happened…?”

“Seung Team Leader. We were looking for you. We have a meeting to attend.”

Just as she was about to ask Mi-ran more details about the hit-and-run accident, a member from another team came to find her.

“Oh right! That’s true.”

Mi-ran was pulled away by the team member and waved goodbye to Jeong-oh.

The important conversation came to an abrupt halt. Jeong-oh placed her hand on her chest and pressed down. Her heart was racing.

If this is true…

‘That means… he might not remember me?’

The hand on her chest moved up to cover her mouth.

No way.

‘He forgot me? Really?’

Even though she trusted Mi-ran, she couldn’t believe it.

She wanted to talk more with Mi-ran and looked for a chance, but the opportunity didn’t arise again.

Before she knew it, lunch break was over.

Jeong-oh had to set aside her heavy thoughts and focus on her afternoon tasks. Closing off her emotions with patience was one of the things Jeong-oh was best at.

The first project at her new company had begun. It was a planning meeting for a new product from an existing client.

She thought only the Production Team 2 would attend the meeting, but when the members of Production Team 2 took their seats, the door opened again. Members of Team 1 entered the meeting room.

Of course, Chae Eun-bi was among them. When Eun-bi's eyes met Jeong-oh's, she warmly greeted Mi-ran, who was sitting next to Jeong-oh.

"Team Leader, you look great in all black today. Chic and sexy!"

"Really? I wore this to go eat jajangmyeon."

"Oh, you went to Hyangmi-gak. Speaking of which, it looks like everyone from Team 2 is wearing black."

Eun-bi scanned the members of Team 2 and said.

Does she think I'm not in Team 2? Jeong-oh grumbled to herself.

Mi-ran took care of Jeong-oh.

"Everyone knows our team's new face, right? This is Lee Jeong-oh, our copywriter."

As Mi-ran reintroduced Jeong-oh to the AE (Account Executive) and members of Production Team 1, Eun-bi smiled kindly, as if meeting someone for the first time.

"Nice to meet you! I'm a copywriter too."

"Yes. Nice to meet you."

Jeong-oh sensed that Eun-bi didn’t want to reveal that they knew each other, so she responded politely.

Eventually, the AE from the planning team briefed the clients’ requests.

“The target is working professionals in their 20s and 30s, and the concept is ‘beer you keep at home for drinking alone after work.’ Since it’s an alcohol advertisement, TV commercials can only air after 10 PM, and outdoor ads aren’t allowed, so we’ll need to target in other directions. If the ideas are good, they plan to actively use them for the product packaging as well. The advertiser is picky and the scale is large, so Production Team 1 will also participate, with the goal of presenting drafts by the last week of May.”

Jeong-oh was pleased with the enticing project brief. It was her first time working on an alcohol advertisement, and she felt excited.

“I’d like us to start brainstorming; please feel free to share your ideas.”

At the AE’s suggestion, Mi-ran spoke first.

“Since it’s about drinking alone at home, how about storytelling from a solo perspective? Show the daily life of a single person looking longingly at happy couples.”

Nodding at Mi-ran’s idea, Jeong-oh scribbled some copy ideas in her notebook.

“Then it’d be advantageous for Team 2. Since everyone here is single.”

In the meantime, the team leader of Team 2 cracked a joke.

Gi-hoon playfully replied, “So you’re assuming I’m single?”

“Do you have a girlfriend, Song Gi-hoon?”

“Not at the moment.”

People burst into laughter. Jeong-oh, who had been a bit tense, was also absorbed by the cheerful atmosphere and laughed along.

In the lively mood, Gi-hoon turned his head and asked Jeong-oh, “Do you have a boyfriend, Assistant?”

“Nope.”

Was it just her feeling? It seemed she heard a suppressed laugh coming from Eun-bi’s direction.

“Oh, Assistant wrote something in her notebook. Can I read it?”

Gi-hoon quickly leaned over to look at Jeong-oh’s notebook. The meeting room fell silent, all attention on her.

“On a snowy day, you should look at the snow, not at him.”

Gi-hoon’s low voice conveyed the copy she had scribbled after hearing Mi-ran’s suggestion.

Laughter and gasps of admiration erupted from all sides.

“Wow, that’s classic copywriter material.”

The usually taciturn Deputy Park Young-gwang exclaimed, giving a thumbs-up.

“It’s great as a solo monologue.”

A male team member from another team clapped lightly.

Amid the admiration, Eun-bi smiled at Jeong-oh and said, “That’s poignant and relatable. You must have been single for a while?”

Jeong-oh clenched and unclenched her fist under the table.

Is she teasing me?

It was frustrating. Frustrating, but she couldn’t get angry since it was somewhat true.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Jeong-oh shrugged her shoulders.

“I might not do as well. It’s been so long since I was single that the feelings are pretty distant. Why don’t you write the main copy?”

I really don’t want to know your personal details.

Jeong-oh rolled her eyes inwardly at Eun-bi’s remark, though she kept a pleasant smile on her face.

The AE wrapped up the meeting.

“I think what you’ve shared can be kept as one idea tip, and we can develop it in various directions. Let’s schedule the next meeting for next Tuesday.”

“Sure. Thanks for your hard work.”

As the meeting concluded and people began to rise from their seats, Eun-bi slowly gathered her things and greeted Jeong-oh.

“Assistant, I look forward to working with you.”

“Yes, me too.”

Eun-bi deliberately moved her hands slowly. A ring sparkled on her left ring finger.

As Mi-ran watched Eun-bi, she smiled warmly and asked, “When is Team Leader Chae getting married?”

Eun-bi’s expression brightened as if she had been waiting for that question.

“My mom hopes it’ll be before the year ends, but as you know, he’s really busy. I still don’t know for sure.”

Eun-bi tossed her hair behind her ear, showcasing the ring on her left hand, which boasted a fancy design.

Jeong-oh couldn’t help but overhear the conversation. However, she wasn’t really curious. All Jeong-oh wanted to know was about Jeong Ji-heon’s amnesia.

After the meeting room was tidied up, Mi-ran, noticing that Jeong-oh was looking at her intently, asked, “Assistant, what’s up? Do you have something to say?”

It was a perfect moment with just the two of them left in the meeting room.

“About that accident with Director Jeong earlier…”

“Yeah? What about it?”

“Do you know when that accident happened?”

Mi-ran, rolling her eyes and thinking deeply, picked up her phone.

“Wait a minute.”

After accessing a portal site and searching for a while, Mi-ran showed her phone screen to Jeong-oh.

“This is the article about Director Jeong.”

“……”

“They’ve blocked all the articles from your family, so this is the only one left.”

“On November 3rd around 1 PM, an incident occurred where a man in his 20s, residing in an officetel in Yongsan-gu, Seoul, was hit by a hit-and-run vehicle. The suspect who fled after the accident was caught by police around 7 PM, and the victim was confirmed to be in critical condition.”

Her hands trembled slightly.

November 3rd, seven years ago.

She remembered that day.

The day she had a promise to meet Ji-heon.

The day he was supposed to pick her up at three but never showed up.

The day she made dozens of calls only to eventually receive a notification that his phone was turned off.

“Assistant, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“…I’m fine. …Thank you for letting me know.”

Jeong-oh struggled to say goodbye and handed the phone back to Mi-ran.

Stumbling, she walked toward her seat, feeling dizzy as if the floor and ceiling had swapped places.

Amid the chaos, she suddenly recalled what Deputy Park Seung-kyu had said a few hours earlier.

“Actually, I’ve known Director Jeong for 16 years. Our distinguished director probably doesn’t even remember properly.”

He had definitely said that Ji-heon didn’t remember properly.

Was that about his amnesia?

She couldn’t just stand by. She had to confirm it directly.

Jeong-oh changed direction and quickly headed toward Ji-heon’s office. As she hurried to the office, her footsteps became faster, and by the time she reached the door, she was nearly running.

“What’s going on?”

A secretary guarding the office door asked as Jeong-oh reached for the doorknob.

“Is the director in?”

“He’s probably in the lounge.”

“Okay, thank you.”

Jeong-oh turned and dashed toward the lounge.

The ninth-floor lounge was quite spacious. It featured various tables and chairs that could be used for different purposes, along with many books, massage chairs, entertainment facilities, and simple refreshments.

Ji-heon, who had just parted with a client visiting the company, turned at the sound of her footsteps, which felt oddly intrusive.

Upon recognizing the woman entering the lounge, he swallowed hard.

His body tensed up.

It’s Lee Jeong-oh… again.

Ji-heon tried to hide his discomfort, gazing at her silently.

She, too, noticed Ji-heon from a few steps away and stopped in her tracks.

Though she was tightly pursing her lips, her chest was visibly rising and falling. With each breath she took, her small shoulders shook.

Seeing her looking like someone who had lost something precious made Ji-heon turn his head away. He couldn’t shake the thought that she was looking past him, at someone else.

But there was no one behind Ji-heon. No, the lounge was completely empty.

It was just her and Lee Jeong-oh.

Fearing that tears would burst forth before she could even speak, Jeong-oh bit her lip.

What words should she say first?

After running around searching for him, standing right in front of him made her head feel hazy.

“Do you really not remember? Really? Nothing at all?”

Have you truly forgotten me?

You’re not pretending to forget; you genuinely don’t remember?

“Then, you don’t even know we have a child?”

You don’t know that you’ve become a father?

Her heart raced so much it felt heavy.

Suppressing her emotions, she struggled to open her mouth.

“…Do you know who I am?”

“I do.”

Ji-heon replied easily.

“Copywriter Lee Jeong-oh.”

His voice was deep, but the answer was terribly apathetic.

That coldness crushed her heart, which had been in ruins for so long.

“…Is that all?”

“Is there anything more I should know?”

He had forgotten everything.

“I’d prefer to talk about what happened this morning.”

To him, the conflict from a few hours ago was more significant than the past few years.

She faced the miserable reality.

How? How could you forget me?

Her heart felt like it was being torn apart; it was so painful that Jeong-oh had to wrap her hands around her chest again.

How could you forget me!

What kind of person were you to me?

What kind of person was I to you that you could forget? How could you!

The man before her showed no reaction, even while looking at his distorted face.

She wanted to grab him by the collar, demand answers, and punch him in the chest.

But there he stood, endlessly and helplessly pitiful.

“…How much have you suffered? How badly were you hurt that you lost your memory…?”

She wanted to scream, embracing the cold man who looked at her as if she were a stranger, like a foreign object stuck to his hand.

Have you been well? Huh?

Did you forget me completely and manage to live well? What about you?

I was terrified.

With just you missing from my life, my whole world was darkness.

It felt like my eyes had been gouged out, and I couldn’t see anything.

In that darkness, I wandered and gave birth to a child.

“Your child was born. A child you don’t know about…”

That child is now seven years old.

Very pretty, very capable, and so mature like you.

The time you’ve missed is still growing.

Our child is growing, beautifully, painfully…

Countless words that had been trapped in her chest threatened to pour out all at once. Yet, Jeong-oh found herself unable to speak, her mouth merely moving without sound.

Tears, faster than words, dropped in a straight line to the floor.

Ji-heon’s gaze, which had been cold and distant, wavered.

At that moment.

“Oppa. Were you here?”

A woman’s voice echoed.

Jeong-oh recognized it.

“I heard you went to see Dad and Mom this morning. They said to come together next time.”

It was Chae Eun-bi.

Eun-bi approached, continuing her chatter without checking if Ji-heon was alone.

Though it was the lounge, she acted as if she didn’t care who else was present.

“It’s so hard to see you, even though we work in the same company.”

Her voice, full of charm, felt like a dagger stabbing into Jeong-oh’s heart.

Jeong-oh quickly wiped her tears.

“…Oppa?”

As Eun-bi tilted her head, she realized Ji-heon wasn’t alone, frowning slightly.

But soon her expression brightened, and she stood beside him, linking her arm with his.

“Oppa, I didn’t tell you?”

Her demeanor seemed like she was introducing Jeong-oh to Ji-heon, but Jeong-oh knew better.

She was trying to brag about Ji-heon to him.

“Lee Jeong-oh, my friend. We’re high school classmates.”

After the friendly introduction, Eun-bi turned to Jeong-oh.

“Jeong-oh, what’s going on?”

What’s wrong with my man?

Eun-bi’s question carried that implication.

The ring on her hand sparkled painfully as it clung tightly to Ji-heon’s arm.

…My child’s father has a fiancée.

Ch11 - The One Who Will Be My Wife

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After receiving a reprimand from his friend Seung-kyu, Ji-heon found himself once again standing in front of the elevator’s trash can.

The item he had dropped into the trash can, still in its paper bag, remained in the same position.

He reached out and pulled the box from the bag.

There was a card attached to the box. He unfolded the card.

– Thank you for inviting me. I’ll learn a lot and become a great person. Enjoy the snacks!

His expression crumpled as he carefully read the crooked handwriting. He considered throwing the card away again but ended up putting it in his pocket. When Ji-heon returned to his office with the box, he opened it to check its contents.

Brown cookies with various nuts embedded in them were inside. The shape was as terrible as he had expected.

However, without much hesitation, Ji-heon picked up a cookie and tore off the plastic wrapping.

He took a bite, chewing slowly and thoughtfully.

It wasn’t bad.

Normally, he would refuse food gifts, but he accepted it out of courtesy. Since he wouldn’t have to see the children from the daycare and the chaperone again, he had disposed of it without much thought.

Throwing away gifts was something that happened all the time, so he felt no particular emotions—until that woman appeared.

“How could you throw that away?”

He wasn’t irritated by her informal speech.

There was something about her tone, intonation, and trembling gaze that felt like it went beyond simple resentment.

It was as if she was questioning, “Why are you living like this?”

Could a mere employee be so audacious as to challenge an executive at work?

If there was a hidden motive, it would be truly cunning; if it was a genuine heart, it took remarkable courage.

And in the midst of a busy afternoon.

Ji-heon met Jeong-oh again in the break room.

She rushed in and, before he could speak, shot him a question.

“…Do you know who I am?”

“I do.”

“…”

“Copywriter Lee Jeong-oh.”

“…What else?”

He couldn’t grasp the essence of her question.

It felt like an accusation of why he had grabbed the wrist of a woman he didn’t know well, or perhaps a hint that he had missed something.

Either way, it wasn’t pleasant. Ji-heon didn’t like being at the mercy of others.

Most importantly, he didn’t want to reveal that his heart was gradually becoming unsettled.

“Is there anything more I should know?”

“…”

“I’d rather talk about what happened this morning.”

He decided to take the opportunity before she could say something more absurd.

You questioned how I could throw that away, so I picked it up.

But suddenly, thick tears fell from her eyes.

Crying? Why?

Ji-heon, who had planned to respond coldly no matter how she challenged him, found himself lost.

What on earth was the problem this time?

He furrowed his brow and retraced the events.

Had Seung-kyu upset her?

He had thought that Park Seung-kyu would handle such matters with ease, but it seemed he had dealt with it more roughly than expected.

While it was likely that Seung-kyu had acted to protect him, it didn’t sit well with him.

However, separate from that, he thought she was beautiful. For the first time.

The woman was crying, and that vulnerable sight stirred something within him.

He wanted to watch her cry like this for hours, trapped in his office with the door tightly shut.

But was he really only interested in her tears?

“Oppa. Were you here?”

Suddenly, a voice came from the break room door. It was Chae Eun-bi.

Ji-heon reflexively lowered one hand, which he had unconsciously raised toward Jeong-oh.

Jeong-oh, looking flustered, quickly wiped her tears. Nonetheless, her eyes were still red.

Had she been very upset? He should have asked that.

“Oppa, I didn’t tell you? This is Lee Jeong-oh, my friend. We’re high school classmates.”

In the midst of their awkwardness, Ji-heon’s arm was held by Eun-bi’s hand.

“Jeong-oh, what’s going on?”

“Uh, nothing. I just came to look at some books.”

Jeong-oh answered with her head stiffly turned.

Ji-heon knew it was an excuse.

“What books?”

“Books for reference on liquor advertisements.”

“Oh my, Jeong-oh, when it’s just us, you can speak informally. You’re not trying to embarrass me on purpose, are you?”

“Ah, no. No, I’ll go.”

Quickly responding to Eun-bi’s question, Jeong-oh seemed like someone fleeing from a pursuer as she hurriedly left.

After Jeong-oh departed, only Ji-heon and Eun-bi remained, their arms falling apart.

Eun-bi was left with an uncomfortable question.

What had that been about? It seemed like there was some backstory.

Lee Jeong-oh was blushing in front of Ji-heon, and Ji-heon remained stiff in that situation.

“Oppa, what’s going on? What did Jeong-oh say to you?”

As expected, Ji-heon didn’t respond. He never provided the answers Eun-bi wanted to hear.

Eun-bi wasn’t easily hurt by such things either.

“I’m just saying this in case, but don’t trust Jeong-oh too much. She’s not someone you can rely on.”

His eyebrows twitched slightly.

“In high school, she secretly messed with my makeup and then acted innocent when I caught her. Everyone else knew, but she kept denying it, and it was a bit scary.”

“…”

“I think she’s probably grown out of it now, but just be cautious.”

He showed no reaction, merely lowering his eyelids to look at the ring on her left hand.

It was a ring that she had boasted was a gift from him. Ji-heon, of course, didn’t know this.

Feeling a bit embarrassed, Eun-bi quickly hid her left hand behind her back.

Even so, his fierce gaze didn’t relent.

There were times when his piercing eyes seemed capable of crushing his opponent, and yet he showed no emotion, which was chilling.

But today…

“You, too. Chae Eun-bi.”

“…”

“Don’t cross the line.”

It felt like something deeper was stirring beneath the surface.

Eun-bi felt her emotions rising.

After Ji-heon left, Eun-bi stood in place for a long time.

‘It’s just an act of pretending to date to avoid having troublesome people come into my life.’

Four years ago, rumors of a romantic relationship between Eun-bi and Ji-heon circulated among their acquaintances. Seizing the opportunity, Eun-bi proposed a nominal relationship to Ji-heon, which he accepted. It was likely an attempt to escape the excessive attention of those around them.

In any case, their mutual interests aligned well, and the relationship has continued smoothly to this day.

At work, Eun-bi has effectively leveraged her relationship with Ji-heon. She boasted about receiving all kinds of love from him, wore a beautiful ring as if it were a gift from him, and even browsed engagement gifts, hinting that they would marry soon.

While she enjoyed this on her own, Ji-heon suddenly transferred to Max Planning.

Initially, she was terrified, fearing he might turn out to be a braggart. However, Ji-heon surprisingly said nothing.

It was unclear whether he was pretending not to know or genuinely oblivious. Regardless, Ji-heon continued to treat her indifferently, just as he always had.

A truly nominal, fake relationship.

Nevertheless, Eun-bi was excelling in her role. Twice a week, she called Mrs. Jang Young-mi to butter her up, receiving affection in return. Young-mi already considered Eun-bi as a daughter-in-law.

Thus, Eun-bi’s hopes turned into conviction.

Although she and Ji-heon were currently awkward with each other, she was certain that she would one day become his wife.

She was convinced that he would be hers.

Jeong Ji-heon was the man who would make her shine the most.

Despite the rumors, if one looked into his past, they would be surprised at how clean his romantic history was. No one knew if he had some form of obsessive cleanliness, but Jeong Ji-heon would likely remain single. Therefore, the only person who could become his wife was Eun-bi.

Just like today, all she had to do was drive away annoying flies like Lee Jeong-oh.

Ji-heon was unaware of how hard Eun-bi was working.

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Evening time.

Jeong-oh scanned through the materials he was assigned.

He had to participate in a competitive presentation starting today, which meant he was stuck working overtime. Sitting still made his thoughts wander.

Ji-heon and Eun-bi. He never thought he would see them side by side.

He almost let slip some information about Ye-na to Ji-heon.

Seven years might not be enough time for complete amnesia, but it’s certainly enough time for significant changes.

Hoo…

Drrrrr.

As he sighed, his phone vibrated. It was a call from his mother, Lee Guk-soon.

He realized only after the phone vibrated that he hadn’t called home while working overtime.

The shock of meeting Ji-heon and Eun-bi in the same space had left him dazed.

Jeong-oh quickly stood up and answered the call.

“Hello?”

[Are you working late?]
“Yeah. How’s Ye-na?”

[She’s been singing about wanting ice cream, so I told her I’d buy it for her after dinner, but she’s mad at Grandma.]

“Pfft.”

Imagining her daughter’s face was the only comfort to soothe her dry heart.

[Do you like her? Your granddaughter says she hates Grandma?]
“Mom, don’t say that with a smile.”

[Have you eaten?]
“Yeah. You don’t need to worry about my meals.”

Well, Guk-soon chuckled softly.

[By the way, I found that hairpin at the restaurant. I’ve kept it for you.]
“Hmm? What hairpin?”

[The purple one that’s round and elongated, with a jewel at the end. You were looking for it, remember?]
“When was that?”

[It must have been about a year ago.]
“Why are you bringing up something from a year ago now? Of course, I’ve forgotten it by now.”

[You’re the one who forgets. How could I forget when you talked about it so much?]
“…Did I?”

[You worked so hard to find it, and you forgot about it?]
“It wasn’t that important to me.”

[If you’re not going to use it, I’ll take it. I have to keep it for you.]
While her mother was thinking of her daughter, Eun-bi was thinking of another man.

The hairpin, which she had forgotten about, overlapped with her life.

Was Lee Jeong-oh like that hairpin to Ji-heon?

Something lost without knowing it, and not searching for it again. Just like a useless memory?

Not just one year ago, but a person from a full seven years ago.

I should have forgotten you, too. I was upset that I couldn’t.

Past love is like broken glass. It’s already useless, yet it still sparkles for no reason.

Knowing that those shards of glass could hurt me, I still reach out foolishly.

And so, I become even more sorrowful.

Thinking her daughter was busy with silence, Guk-soon wrapped up the call.

[Will you be late?]
“No, I won’t be too late. It’s the first day of the PT.”

[Okay. Don’t work too hard, and work in a cool place. It’s really hot today.]
“Yeah. Don’t worry.”

Jeong-oh confidently hung up the phone.

The meeting was about to begin.

As Jeong-oh was about to move to the meeting room, Eun-bi waved at him.

“Lee Jeong-oh.”

Since they were in the same department and right next to each other’s teams, he would likely see Eun-bi often in the future. They would frequently collaborate like this.

If he planned to stay at this company, he needed to overcome any discomfort.

Jeong-oh steadied his mind and approached Eun-bi.

“Are you also going to the competitive PT meeting?”

“Yes, Manager.”

“Could you take this to the meeting room?”

Eun-bi pointed to three laptops. They probably wouldn’t be too heavy together, but they looked like personal laptops.

“They’re necessary for the meeting.”

“Okay, I understand.”

Jeong-oh nodded and lifted the three laptops. They weren’t heavy at all. Just as he turned to head toward the meeting room, Eun-bi called him back again.

“Lee Jeong-oh.”

“Yes?”

“Is something bothering you?”

“Me? No, not at all.”

“Your expression seems a bit off.”

My expression? Jeong-oh blinked.

“Are you upset because I assigned you work?”

“Not at all.”

Jeong-oh shook his head vigorously.

I’m really fine!

But Eun-bi’s expression grew darker.

“Lee Jeong-oh, if you get all flustered and red-faced over trivial things, it can make both of us feel uncomfortable.”

Eun-bi’s admonishing tone left Jeong-oh speechless.

What’s so significant about carrying laptops? I really am okay!

In fact, Eun-bi’s scolding made him feel unreasonably heated. He felt embarrassed and wronged.

Finally, Eun-bi let out a deep sigh and took the laptops back from Jeong-oh.

“This is something I’ll carry. Cheer up.”

Her voice was smooth and gentle.

Eun-bi’s angelic response made those around them look at Jeong-oh with cold eyes.

Ch12 - Who is Yena?

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Eun-bi walked ahead, carrying the laptop.

Jeong-oh followed closely behind her into the meeting room.

It was just Eun-bi and Jeong-oh in the meeting room.

After placing the laptop on the table, Eun-bi casually asked,
“Jeong-oh, why does your expression look like that?”

“What do you mean?”

“It looks like you’re chewing on something.”

Jeong-oh was taken aback. He couldn’t understand why Eun-bi kept picking on him.

“What am I chewing? I’m not chewing on anything!”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

“……”

“You look like you’re chewing on something, even though you’re not.”

“……”

“Jeong-oh, I’ll just say one thing for your sake. You should probably work on your facial expressions.”

“……”

“I’m not at a higher rank than you for no reason, you know?”

Eun-bi’s sarcastic tone, delivered in a thoughtful voice, made Jeong-oh clench his fists.

In a way, it was a relief.

At least he had quickly figured out Eun-bi’s true nature again.

Yeah, Eun-bi.

You might think you’ve dampened my spirit, but—
‘I, as a mother, will never despair!’

It’s been seven years since I’ve lived as a mother in this land. Even if I only level up once a year, I’m level 7.

My life is complicated enough without your torment. So, I won’t allow your harassment.

‘I really need to buckle down!’

Jeong-oh felt a fire igniting within him.

A little while later, people started coming into the meeting room.

This competitive PT had formed a TF team. With Ko Eun-joo from Team 2 stepping out, Team 1 was represented by copywriter Chae Eun-bi, graphic designer Jo Si-nae, and Jo Yu-ri.

Once everyone was gathered, the AE briefed them on the bidding details.

“Two days ago, I and Team 1’s leader, Seong Mi-ran, visited the company for an explanation. A new app called ‘Me & Talk’ is being developed by the budget mobile carrier, So-ri Telecom. They plan to run brand advertisements in line with the launch. Think of Me & Talk as a simple video call app. The existing video calls usually have some delay, but Me &

Talk has incorporated technology that significantly reduces this delay time. It works quite well even in areas with weak signals.”

Video calls. Jeong-oh’s eyes lit up with interest.

Given that he was leaving Yena with his mother while working, he used video calls quite often. Although he couldn’t do it openly, whenever he had to, he would use the emergency stairs or secluded places, which often had weak signals.

‘I hope a good app comes out.’

With a flutter of excitement, he began brainstorming various ideas.

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While the briefing was ongoing, the entrance door suddenly swung open.

Jeong-oh’s heart skipped a beat.

Jeong-hee walked in, and the meeting room fell silent at once.

The AE also paused their explanation.

Ji-heon told the AE not to worry about him.
“Please continue.”

“Ah, yes.”

As the AE resumed their explanation, Ji-heon sat down next to Eun-bi. Coincidentally, only Eun-bi’s seat was empty, and it was right in front of Jeong-oh. His concentration faltered.

Jeong-oh stealthily turned his gaze to Ji-heon and Eun-bi.

Eun-bi was smiling. She had a look that said she couldn’t contain her happiness with her boyfriend. A woman in love looked beautiful.

The two of them looked quite well together.

‘Are they close?’

That must be the case. No need to ask.

It meant they were going to get married.

Seven years ago, Ji-heon was a very passionate man in that regard.

He didn’t care about locations—whether it was a bed or anywhere else.

He was someone who had tormented Jeong-oh. That kind of inclination wouldn’t just disappear.

‘If anything, it would only increase, not decrease.’

A woman he has been dating for a few months can’t possibly compete with a woman he has been with for years.

‘Besides, I’m a person who doesn’t even exist in this man’s memory anymore.’

Jeong-oh turned his head toward the AE, resigning himself to the situation.

But then, one side of his cheek felt strangely prickly.

It felt like someone was staring at him intensely…

‘Gasp!’

As soon as he subtly turned his head again, he made eye contact with Ji-heon. Jeong-oh quickly lowered his head, almost burying his face in his notebook.

‘No, why is he looking at me?’

If he came to the meeting, he should focus on the meeting, not be looking at him, especially with his girlfriend right beside him!

After hastily reacting, he thought maybe he had overreacted.

This man might have completely forgotten all memories of him; he might not even be looking at him.

Jeong-oh reflected on this and raised his head again.

Fortunately, no one noticed his strange behavior.

“Here, they plan to include a text messaging service and a gaming service. They will also sequentially open news and shopping services. The app is still in the beta testing stage, so we haven’t been able to access it directly. So-ri Telecom will contact us soon. Please pay attention to security. The competing companies are Gwangya Communication, Lulumi Media, and Max Planning.”

After the AE finished the briefing, Eun-bi asked a question.

“What’s the bidding scale?”

“Combined ATL (above-the-line advertising) and BTL (below-the-line advertising) will total 5 billion won for three months. Production costs and online expenses are separate.”

“That sounds good.”

Ji-heon, who had been quietly listening, smiled as he spoke.

The gazes of everyone gathered in the meeting room shifted to Ji-heon. Even amidst that, Jeong-oh felt like Ji-heon was still staring at him, which made him feel awkward for no reason.

What’s so good about it? What’s so great?

“Looking forward to it.”

Looking forward to what?

Why is he saying something so burdensome while looking at me?

It felt like he was either glaring at him or observing him closely.

Jeong-oh felt nervous the whole time, worried someone might find this gaze suspicious.

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Every time he goes to the office, it feels like he ages a year.

He arrived home well past 9 PM.

Yena opened the front door weakly, greeting Jeong-oh with enthusiasm. “Mom!”

“Yena, you’re still not asleep?”

“Yeah! I was waiting for you, Mom. Let’s go to bed quickly.”

Yena pulled Jeong-oh along. Jeong-oh smiled brightly at Guk-soon, who followed behind, and entered the room with Yena.

“Mom, I’ve spread out the blankets.”

Yena said with sleepy eyes. The yoga mat was spread out wide in the room. He felt proud of his daughter, who knew how to do things without being told.

“Good job, princess. Let’s sleep quickly.”

Jeong-oh thought he needed to get Yena to sleep right away, so he lay down. Yena hugged him tightly and took a deep breath as if smelling him. Jeong-oh gently patted Yena’s head.

“Did you meet Dobin today?”

“Yeah. But, Mom…”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Park Dobin keeps following me around. It’s driving me crazy.”

Yena lifted her head and showed her face as she spoke.

Despite saying it was annoying, a smile was evident on her lips even in the darkness.

How cute. She’s so pretty, of course she’s popular. Mom is really tired, you know.

Yena was Jeong-oh’s source of strength.

“Did Dobin teach you how to play Go today?”

“Mom, you learn Go from a teacher. Dobin and Yena both learn from a teacher.”

“Right. You learn from a teacher.”

Agreeing with Yena’s answer, Jeong-oh sighed.

I wish I had a teacher to guide me through life. A teacher who tells me the right answer when problems arise.

After putting Yena to bed and heading to the kitchen, Jeong-oh took a can of beer from the refrigerator.

Guk-soon, who had finished hand-washing, came out of the bathroom and glared at Jeong-oh, then presented him with dried squid.

Sigh. Even with his favorite snack in front of him, the night felt heavy with sighs.

“Are you going to sigh like that until the ground collapses?”

Guk-soon said bluntly.

“Mom, should I quit my job?”

“Sure. Go ahead and quit.”

Guk-soon easily replied to Jeong-oh’s complaints.

“Just quit everything. I quit the restaurant too.”

“No, why would you quit the restaurant? You could just run it together with me.”

“Use you for help. You can’t even cook properly.”

Guk-soon pointed out sharply.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if you had at least inherited some cooking skills?”

“You said there’s no need for you to be good at cooking. You said your hands would suffer later.”

“That was because I thought you might have to live with your in-laws. Did I think the place you’d marry into would be so terrible?”

No. Mom is better off not knowing about that family.

Realizing she might have said something too harsh, Guk-soon’s tone softened quickly.

“I had nothing to pass on, so I passed on my fate.”

Following her mother, Jeong-oh had now become the second unmarried mother in the family.

Jeong-oh felt she had also spoken unnecessarily.

Her mother had done her best to live, and Jeong-oh felt sorry for her mom who seemed to be apologizing for it.

Her mother, who raised her alone, was Jeong-oh’s sun and path. Her mother was indeed the teacher of life.

Although she had ended up living a similar fate as her mother, Jeong-oh needed to prove that it could never be a sadness in her life.

Lee Jeong-oh is Lee Guk-soon’s treasure, Lee Guk-soon’s pride.

“Why? Is the company not good?”

Guk-soon asked with concern.

“No, I was just saying it for the sake of saying it.”

Jeong-oh laughed it off, reflecting on the words he had carelessly let slip.

If someone asked if the company was good, he truly wouldn’t have an answer. Everything was far better compared to the previous company, except for Ji-heon.

Ji-heon. That one person was overwhelmingly powerful.

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The days are getting warmer.

Worried that if she turned on the air conditioner now, she’d be stuck with it all summer, Jin-seo took out a fan.

Her two kids, Dobin and Doyun, sat in front of the fan, singing. Jin-seo chuckled at the sounds of their voices scattering as they hit the fan blades.

Reaching out, Jin-seo took Doyun and cleaned his face and brushed his teeth.

Washing the three-year-old Doyun wasn’t too difficult. The problem was Dobin. Having quickly sensed what kind of plan his mother had, Dobin hid while Jin-seo took Doyun inside.

“Park Dobin. Come out quickly. You need to wash.”

“Where are we going to wash?”

A sound came from the wardrobe. Jin-seo approached it.

“You need to wash everything. Brush your teeth, wash your face, and clean your hands and feet.”

“Can’t I just wash my face and skip brushing my teeth?”

“Is that even a question? Of course not.”

Suddenly, the wardrobe door burst open!

“Ahhh!”

As Jin-seo opened the wardrobe, Dobin pushed her back and ran away. Not only was washing him a struggle, but now she had to play tag before getting it done.

Fortunately, she caught him quickly today. However, her seven-year-old son, who had grown taller and bigger, put up a fierce resistance against his mother’s grasp.

“Mom, just today. Just once. Just once!”

“There’s no such thing as just today. Is it okay for the cavity bugs to eat you all up?”

“No! No! I won’t brush my teeth!”

With Dobin squirming, Jin-seo sighed and finally let go.

He never listens to good reasoning. Jin-seo resorted to her last method.

In a voice so intimidating it would put even the legends to shame, she said, “Do you want to brush your teeth or do you want to get hit by your mom?”

“…I’ll take the hit.”

“Come here!”

“Ahhhh!”

“Why are you running away if you said you’d take it?”

When the second round of tag began, the front door opened. Seung-kyu, who had just come home from work, sneaked into the master bedroom to avoid his furious wife and started organizing his clothes.

Dobin chased into the master bedroom and hid behind Seung-kyu.

“Park Dobin, come here quickly. Are you not coming?”

“Dad. Help me! Help me!”

“Come here quickly while I’m being nice!”

“That’s not being nice!”

Seeing his wife’s bloodshot eyes made Seung-kyu humble himself and try to persuade Dobin.

“Dobin, you need to listen to your mom.”

“No! Mom said she would hit me!”

Dobin’s eyes filled with tears as he yelled. But Jin-seo wasn’t backing down.

“If you keep this up, I might just tell your friend Yena that you’re Park Dobin and you didn’t even brush your teeth, and you’re super dirty.”

At that moment, a miracle happened.

“Mom, I’ll brush my teeth.”

It was as if the name ‘Yena’ cast a magic spell; suddenly, Dobin’s attitude changed to that of a well-behaved child. Gently taking Jin-seo’s hand, Dobin walked to the bathroom on his own.

Seung-kyu’s eyes widened in disbelief.

Oh my gosh.

Our child has changed.

Who would have thought my filthy child, who secretly eats boogers, would be like this?

Jin-seo came out of the bathroom with a tired expression, and Seung-kyu asked her urgently, “Who is Yena?”

He felt an urge to visit her family and bow to them in gratitude.

“She’s Dobin’s friend from Go academy. She’s pretty and very smart. The director praised her a lot.”

“Oh. She sounds like a wonderful child?”

“Yeah. I hope Dobin can be good friends with her.”

“Right. They should be good friends.”

For the first time in a while, Seung-kyu felt a rush of excitement.

Ch13 - My name? Lee Jeong-o.

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The next day.

Ji-heon was busy from the morning.

He had a business trip to Incheon, where he had lunch with a client, and in the afternoon, there was a meeting at headquarters.

It wasn’t until around quitting time that Ji-heon returned to the office, where his secretary greeted him.

“Director, you’re back.”

“Did anything come up?”

“Executive Jea-eun from Ja-eun Construction contacted you this morning, and CEO Rahahn from Rahahn Ceramics said he would reach out separately. Lawyer Chae Eun-yeob also came by for a brief visit this morning.”

Chae Eun-yeob. He was Ji-heon’s high school classmate and Eun-bi’s older brother. A capable lawyer working at a prestigious law firm, Eun-yeob had been consulting for the Saeran Group, so he had been visiting Ji-heon’s company quite often.

It seemed he had stopped by this time to see Ji-heon’s face after his consulting visit.

“Got it.”

“Oh, by the way, Assistant Lee Jeong-o came by yesterday.”

The secretary conveyed what she hadn’t mentioned before as Ji-heon was about to enter his office.

Ji-heon turned back, still holding the doorknob.

“When?”

“She came while you were in the lounge. I told her you were in the lounge.”

Didn’t she say she came to read a book yesterday?

He was sure it was an excuse, but after confirming, a small smile escaped him.

Did she look for me that hard? Why? Is it because she felt wronged after being scolded by Park Seung-kyu?

“Call her back.”

For some reason, he felt glad.

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Tasks were gradually falling off.

Throughout the morning, Jeong-o revised the online advertising copy drafts, and in the afternoon, she received the client’s confirmation and began working on variations. Sitting next to Gi-hun, she checked dozens of banners one by one, and dizziness began to set in.

It might also be due to her not having slept properly for a while.

“Uh? Assistant, I think there’s a typo here.”

As she stared blankly at the monitor, Gi-hun pointed at the confirmed draft.

Jeong-o stretched her neck and examined the text.

– Prime Outlet First Season OFF Sale! Up to 75% Murder! Enjoy the benefits at prime prices!

“Gasp.”

She had mistakenly written ‘75% murder’ instead of ‘75% discount’!

What was supposed to be an exciting sale was nearly a horrific murder scene.

Jeong-o quickly covered the confirmation draft with her hand, making sure no one could see.

How could this have been confirmed? Thank goodness it went unnoticed.

Since the confirmation draft was nearly 30 pages long, the client probably just skimmed through it.

Gi-hun chuckled and teased her.

“If you only murder at 75%, isn’t that attempted murder?”

“It’s a secret, Gi-hun. Please keep it a secret.”

Jeong-o lowered her voice and pleaded.

“Show me.”

“Please don’t. Gi-hun, is there something you want to eat? I’ll treat you to dinner?”

“I don’t think one meal will cut it.”

Gi-hun was even more amused by Jeong-o’s serious expression. In the meantime, the office phone rang at her desk. Jeong-o crossed over to answer the call.

“Yes. This is Lee Jeong-o.”

[Hello, Assistant. This is Yoon Ae-ran, Director Jeong Ji-heon’s secretary. Director Jeong would like to see you.]

Jeong-o froze, still holding the receiver.

“What is it about?”

Why? Why, again?

[It seems to be about your visit yesterday.]
“…Yes. Understood.”

After the slow response, Gi-hun asked Jeong-o,

“Is there something going on, Assistant?”

“Hmm? No… I’ll just step out for a bit.”

“Where to?”

Unable to even answer Gi-hun’s question, Jeong-o moved her feet.

She had an idea of why she was being called. It must be awkward since she had shed tears right in front of him yesterday. Jeong-o regretted hastily showing her emotions.

Knock, knock.

“Director, this is Lee Jeong-o.”

“Yes.”

Jeong-o entered.

Ji-heon stood up from his seat.

As usual, he looked pale, and she bowed her head slightly in greeting.

It was the first time he had summoned a mid-level employee to his office twice.

“I came because you called.”

His gaze drew a line, and his expression was cautiously guarded.

He was trying hard to appear nonchalant.

Yet, the fear was evident.

Even while being this tense, he was as bold as anyone.

That charming gap continued to pique his interest.

‘This isn’t normal.’

Ji-heon was beginning to realize this feeling wasn’t normal.

His feelings towards this woman had already crossed the boundaries of mere employee relations.

He just needed to understand her better.

What kind of person she was.

Was it sheer audacity, or did she have some ulterior motive?

He wanted her, but he didn’t want to give his heart.

This was Ji-heon’s way of not trusting anyone.

“Please, have a seat.”

Jeong-o sat down in the chair Ji-heon offered.

He also sat across from her.

In this space with just the two of them, Jeong-o became unnecessarily tense, remembering what kind of person he was.

Her gaze, lowered, caught on his broad chest.

She discreetly stole a glance at his chest, rising and falling slowly with each regulated breath.

Even that physiological phenomenon felt obscene due to memories.

Jeong-o shook off her thoughts and lowered her gaze.

On the table, a box of cookies was placed.

“Take as many as you want. They’re the cookies from yesterday.”

“Excuse me?”

“That cookie you asked me why I threw away, that one.”

“…That cookie? …You picked it up from there?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Oh, no.”

Jeong-o blankly picked up a piece of cookie packaging and placed it on her lap.

He couldn’t possibly be inviting me to taste a cookie he found in the trash.

Sure enough, after a moment, Ji-heon got to the point.

“I heard from my secretary that you were looking for me yesterday.”

“Ah… Yes.”

“You should explain why you were searching for me.”

“I was also looking for you because of the cookies.”

Jeong-o boldly presented the answer she had prepared.

“I wanted to say that if you’re going to throw away food, please give it to me instead.”

Yes. You might be suspicious. But please believe me! You must believe me!

“I’m serious about food.”

“Is that why you were looking for me?”

“Yes.”

“And you cried because you couldn’t say that?”

“That was… just because there were other circumstances.”

“What other circumstances?”

“It’s just personal circumstances.”

With her lips pressed tightly together and Ji-heon squinting at her, Jeong-o felt anxious that he might see right through her.

However, Ji-heon posed an unexpected question.

“Did Deputy Park Seung-kyu threaten you or something?”

“Excuse me?”

“Park Seung-kyu. The Deputy from the HR team.”

“Oh, no. Not at all. I think Deputy Park Seung-kyu is a nice person.”

Jeong-o waved her hands in surprise.

But Ji-heon still looked at her as if he couldn’t believe her.

‘Ah, I can’t show weakness.’

Her heart ached with pity as she felt warmth rising in her nose.

The man who hadn’t even told her who he was or what kind of family he came from.

The man who had never shown any friends or even said he loved her.

And the man who had forgotten all that.

The man who couldn’t trust her…

He didn’t even know that she had a child. He couldn’t remember.

Was he a bad person or a pitiful one?

‘Ah, but…’

Jeong-o’s eyes widened as she looked at him with pity.

There was certainly a mismatch.

Seven years ago, after his accident, he had lost his memory.

‘But I clearly spoke with you after the accident.’

How could he have called if he had lost his memory?

‘Did he think I was a stalker, treating me coldly even though he didn’t remember me?’

Yes, that could be possible. But even if he thought she was a stalker, he should at least remember her name.

The man she had run into in the hallway just the day before had a blank expression, not even knowing the name Lee Jeong-o.

‘What if he knows me but is pretending not to?’

Was he putting on a huge act?

She couldn’t be certain.

The Ji-heon she knew from seven years ago and the Ji-heon now seemed like completely different people.

No, he could have always been that kind of person, playing a role in front of her. If he had approached her from the start just to fulfill his desires, he wouldn’t have needed to imitate a pure-hearted man.

If he hadn’t had the accident, he might have been the one to take her to the hospital to get rid of the child himself.

But.

‘Maybe he isn’t the one who did it.’

Her thoughts spiraled into doubt.

Seven years ago, in mid-November, Jeong-o received a call from him. She clearly remembered the cruel words he had said then.

[“I know my mother met you instead of me. Didn’t that end everything?”] [“Haven’t I conveyed my opinion through that?”] [“Because it’s burdensome, can you not contact me anymore?”] [“You wouldn’t want to be a hindrance in someone else’s life, would you?”] [“You better be prepared if you contact me again.”] [“I’ll assume you understood and hang up. Take care.”]

But was that truly his voice?

In an emotional state, she had just assumed that his call was genuine.

What if it wasn’t his voice? What if that call was manipulated?

They had broken up due to someone’s scheme.

“Um, Director.”

Jeong-o mustered up her courage and called out to him.

“Yes.”

“Have you ever heard my name at least once?”

She pronounced her name clearly.

“My name is Lee Jeong-o.”

Her heart raced all over her body.

Ji-heon seemed to think for a moment before responding formally.

“Have you filmed an advertisement famous enough for your name to be known?”

He doesn’t know.

This cold man.

Jeong-o became convinced.

The call from seven years ago was manipulated!

Tears almost spilled out again.

What should she do now?

If he truly forgot her, would it be right to reveal her identity and the existence of Ye-na?

They had lived not knowing each other for seven years. Now this man would be getting married and building a real family?

But the time for deliberation wasn’t long.

It was better for him to know now than to find out after he got married.

For him, for Ye-na.

And for herself.

“I have something to say, Director.”

Jeong-o bravely began.

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Ye-na let out a sigh as she got off the kindergarten bus.

They had said they would come pick her up from the academy, but no one showed up.

It was unlikely they had purposely not come. The bus driver had been driving pretty fast.

Accepting the situation, Ye-na thought she would have to go alone. It was a path she walked every day, so it wouldn’t be difficult to go alone.

Had she taken about ten steps?

“Ah? You were here? The teacher was looking for you for a while.”

A woman came over and spoke to her. It wasn’t the teacher who usually came to greet her.

“But who are you?”

“I’m the new teacher. You’re Ye-na, right?”

It was nice that the teacher knew her name, but it was also puzzling. She instinctively shrank back.

The woman grabbed Ye-na’s hand and pulled her along. It was a bit forceful.

“Let’s go. We need to hurry. It’s getting late.”

The woman held Ye-na’s hand and walked briskly. A seven-year-old child struggled to keep up with her pace. Ye-na had to almost run.

But the direction the woman was going wasn’t towards the Go academy building.

“But where are we going?”

“Where else would we go but the academy?”

“That’s not the way to the academy.”

“The academy moved. Didn’t you know?”

A child couldn’t withstand the pressure of an adult. Ye-na didn’t want to follow but found herself being led by the adult who was holding her hand.

Then fear began to creep in. When she looked back, the sign of the Go academy was nowhere to be seen. She missed her mom.

“I want to call my mom.”

Stubbornly stopping in her tracks, Ye-na glared at the woman. The woman turned around.

But then she looked even more startled and let go of Ye-na’s hand.

“Oh my, who are you?”

The woman crumpled her face as if she had touched a terrible reptile and left before Ye-na could say anything.

In an unfamiliar place, Ye-na was left all alone.

“Mommy…!”

Her pitiful voice echoed along the roadside.

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Do-bin, who had arrived early at the Go academy, waiting eagerly for Ye-na, was becoming increasingly anxious.

‘Is Ye-na not coming today?’

Do-bin couldn’t hold back any longer and went to ask the teacher.

“Teacher, is Ye-na not coming today?”

“No, she should be here soon. It’s about time for her to arrive. I’ll go get her.”

As the teacher stood up, Do-bin grabbed her pants.

“Can I go too?”

“Sure, let’s go together.”

With a happy heart, Do-bin followed the teacher out.

In front of the Go academy building, Do-bin straightened his clothes several times as he excitedly waited for Ye-na.

However, ten more minutes passed, and Ye-na still hadn’t arrived.

“Teacher, why hasn’t Ye-na come yet?”

“Hmm, I think I should call the kindergarten.”

The teacher searched for Ye-na’s kindergarten phone number and dialed.

“Hello. This is the Go academy where Ye-na from the deer class attends. She hasn’t arrived yet.”

[“Oh? Ye-na got off the bus about 15 minutes ago.”]

The teacher’s lips went dry as she hung up the phone.

“What did they say, Teacher?”

“…They said Ye-na got off the bus? Could she have gone up to the academy by herself?”

The teacher called the principal of the Go academy.

[“Ye-na hasn’t arrived yet?”]

The principal’s reply drained the color from the teacher’s face.

Do-bin felt the same way.

“Teacher, is Ye-na missing?”

The teacher couldn’t find the words.

No, she couldn’t live in a world without her. They had to find Ye-na as soon as possible.

Do-bin cupped his small hands around his mouth and shouted loudly.

“Ye-na! Lee Ye-na!”

All he could do was call out for her.

“Lee Ye-na!”

His hoarse voice caught the attention of everyone passing by.

“Lee Ye-naaaaaaaaaa!”

An elderly man passing by chuckled at Do-bin.

“Hey, you really have a loud voice.”

“You shouldn’t be laughing! Ye-na is missing right now!”

Ch14 - Someone Knows

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In a quiet office.

Ji-heon watched Jung-oh as if he were observing her.

In a space with walls all around, he wanted to watch her a little more comfortably, without any interruptions.

Though she always appeared tense, she still showed subtle differences each time.

Initially, she was like a dragonfly trapped in a net, flapping desperately; then she appeared like a detective, grabbing his wrist; at one point, she cried like a sorrowful widow; and now, she looked like an enthusiastic rookie employee.

However, while he enjoyed watching her, he did not want to get involved. Ji-heon shot her a cold glare, just as he did with everyone else.

“Have you shot a commercial famous enough for your name to be known?”

Under Ji-heon’s cold reception, her expression seemed to shift.

After a moment, she forced herself to speak.

“…I have something to say, Director.”

Her dry lips quivered a few times, and as if she had made a decision, she raised her voice.

Drrrrr. Drrrrr.

A vibrating sound interrupted her words.

“Isn’t that a phone call?”

“No, it’s fine.”

Jung-oh covered her pocket with her hand, as if she didn’t want to be interrupted.

The vibration persisted stubbornly.

“Just answer it. It might be an urgent call.”

Ji-heon gestured with his chin as if to be kind.

He was curious about who was calling her.

She reluctantly took out her phone from her pocket. After checking the caller ID, she tilted her head and stood up, bowing slightly.

“Well then, I’ll step outside to take this call.”

Ji-heon’s eyes widened.

No, that’s not what he meant!

Before Ji-heon could stop her, Jung-oh swiftly left the office.

Ha…

He didn’t mean for her to leave. He wanted her to take the call here, in the office.

“Yes, Teacher.”

Outside the office, her voice was audible. It seemed that someone referred to as “Teacher” had called her.

Ji-heon was left waiting helplessly for her to finish her call and come back.

10 minutes, 20 minutes…

As the silence left by her departure dragged on, Ji-heon stared at the clock.

What kind of call takes 30 minutes?

‘Could it be that the person called “Teacher” is a client?’

Around the time 30 minutes passed, Ji-heon could no longer hold back and opened the door. The secretary stood up.

“Is Jung-oh still out?”

“Yes? Jung-oh left a while ago.”

…What a ridiculous situation.

“Tell her to come back.”

At Ji-heon’s sharp voice, the secretary hurriedly picked up the phone.

A moment later, news came back to the office.

“Director, Jung-oh has left.”

What in the world happened? No explanation, no indication of where she was going, and she had said she had something to say.

Ha.

It was so absurd that all he could do was sigh.

He had tried hard not to be tossed around, but it felt like he had been hit hard.

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[Jung-oh's phone call, which interrupted the conversation, led to unexpected events and heightened tensions.]

***

Jung-oh ran out of the company, as if struck by a thunderbolt, leaving without properly organizing her desk.

She only realized she should have mentioned she was stepping out after she had gotten into a taxi. Team Leader Sung Mi-ran had generously understood without needing all the details.

Since it was around the time people were getting off work, the taxi crawled through traffic.

In the car, one minute felt like an hour, or even a year. Jung-oh pleaded.

"Please, driver, faster, faster…"

"I can't go any faster from here."

"Our child is missing… She got off the bus, but since it arrived early… she is missing from the academy…"

Jung-oh spoke in a jumble, just letting her thoughts flow out. The congested road felt like it was choking her.

Though her words were disjointed, the anguish in Jung-oh's heart was conveyed properly. The driver understood her situation well and quickened his pace, taking the fastest route he knew.

The car rushed to a stop in front of the Go academy.

"Teacher!"

Jung-oh jumped out of the taxi and ran toward the principal of the Go academy.

There were people gathered in front of the academy building: the principal, an assistant teacher, a boy, a girl, and a woman about Jung-oh's age.

"Ye-na's mother."

"Where's our Ye-na? Did you find her?"

"We found her. We just received a call."

"Where is she?"

"They said the police are protecting her. They're bringing her this way."

Ha…

Thank you, God.

As the principal relayed the news, the tension in Jung-oh's body melted away, and she placed a hand on her chest, almost collapsing.

The principal and the woman standing next to him supported Jung-oh on either side.

"You must have been very worried… I'm so sorry."

At the principal's apology, Jung-oh shook her head. Tears had started to stream down her cheeks. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand and lifted her face.

As their eyes met, the unfamiliar woman who had supported Jung-oh greeted her.

"Hello. I'm the mother of Do-bin, Ye-na's friend from the academy. Do-bin likes Ye-na… He said he came to see her."

"Oh, hello."

Jung-oh greeted Jin-seo, Do-bin's mother.

The boy, who seemed to be around Ye-na's age, standing next to Jin-seo, bowed shyly and hid behind his mother.

So, you're Do-bin.

Though it was a chaotic time, seeing Ye-na's peers brought Jung-oh both relief and gratitude.

As she regained her composure, she spotted two people approaching from a distance: a tall man in a turquoise police uniform and Ye-na.

"Ye-na!"

The moment Jung-oh saw her, she ran toward her.

"Mom!"

Ye-na rushed into her arms.

Jung-oh hugged Ye-na tightly. Though she had thought about scolding her for worrying everyone, her voice was mixed with tears.

"Let me see. Are you hurt anywhere? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay."

"Where did you go? How could you wander off alone like that?"

"I didn't go alone. A strange lady said she was my academy teacher and took my hand and walked off."

Ye-na spoke clearly.

"She said she was your academy teacher?"

A chill ran down Jung-oh's spine.

"Yeah. She took me away, and then later she said, 'Who are you?' and let go of my hand."

Her heart sank. This was not a problem to take lightly. Looking at the accompanying police officer, he spoke up.

“We suspect it was a suspicious person, and we plan to investigate. We’ll secure the nearby CCTV footage and get back to you.”

The police officer briefly shared his plan before introducing himself.

“I’m Kwon Bae-il, working at the Hwayang Police Station.”

He was a handsome man with a tall stature. With his fair complexion and gentle demeanor, it was hard to imagine him interrogating a criminal.

“Yes. Hello. Thank you so much.”

Jung-oh deeply bowed to express her gratitude. Bae-il, who smiled warmly, explained the situation.

“My colleague saw this girl while on patrol. The boyfriend here has such a loud voice.”

As Bae-il pointed to Do-bin, the boy’s cheeks turned bright red.

“Thanks to that, we quickly learned someone had reported a missing child and began searching. Ye-na ran away from my colleague when she saw him. She probably thought he looked like a scary man since he wasn’t in uniform.”

“Scary man…”

Feeling embarrassed by Bae-il’s description, Ye-na pouted. It seemed that the two had become close in the meantime.

Bae-il continued.

“Eventually, I went to bring her back. She had gone all the way to the fire station.”

“You couldn’t see the police station from there. That’s why I was searching.”

Ye-na replied firmly.

Jung-oh tightly held Ye-na’s hand.

I’m so relieved it turned out like this.

Thank you, God…

Once again, Jung-oh realized that her daughter was her everything, a truth that pierced her to the bone.

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Ji-heon, forgetting his plans to leave work, propped his chin on his hand and stared at the clock.

It had been over an hour since Jung-oh disappeared without a word, and he hadn’t heard from her.

It seemed he had forgotten that he was waiting.

Just after 7 PM, a knock finally sounded.

“Yes.”

However, the person who walked in wasn’t Jung-oh but his friend, Park Seung-kyu.

Ji-heon’s expression changed back to a scowl as he corrected his posture in the chair.

“Aren’t you clocking out?”

Seung-kyu asked leisurely, sitting down in the chair Jung-oh had occupied. Ji-heon’s side glance grew sharper. Seung-kyu, oblivious, opened his mouth to boast about his son.

“Want to hear something funny? My son has a crush on a girl.”

“Your son talks like he’s twenty.”

“Kids these days are like that. Even seven-year-olds seem mature.”

“…”

“He said he fell in love at first sight. He secretly told me without his mom knowing. Kids these days are really something.”

“You might find it amusing, but won’t that girl’s dad be shocked to hear that?”

Seung-kyu’s eyes went blank at Ji-heon’s sarcastic attitude.

Why is her dad being brought into this?

And what’s wrong with my son?

Is there really a dad out there who would be shocked by the notion of falling in love at first sight?

…Something must be bothering my friend.

Seung-kyu stood up and approached Ji-heon. When their eyes met, Ji-heon turned away dismissively.

“What’s going on?”

“What’s going on? Nothing’s wrong.”

“Of course there’s something. Come on.”

“There’s nothing. Just clock out.”

With his head turned and looking elsewhere, Ji-heon seemed like a petulant child. Seung-kyu chuckled and tossed out a joke.

“You don’t like me.”

“What are you talking about? I like you a lot.”

“You like me? You?”

The playful remark turned serious.

Since he had never received such a confession from his friend in 16 years, Seung-kyu’s face momentarily flushed.

“Of course. I like you.”

Ji-heon turned back to Seung-kyu and offered a faint smile.

But for some reason, that faint smile felt crooked.

“That’s why I keep you by my side, even though your mother sent you.”

Seung-kyu’s expression hardened in an instant.

He had thought that he had built a friendship with Ji-heon as a friend, rather than as a superior, and that pride crumbled in an instant.

Ji-heon continued callously.

“I’ll treat you well. I shouldn’t do anything to disappoint you.”

“…So you see me like that.”

Seung-kyu felt a lump in his throat at his friend’s indifferent tone despite the horrible story.

Though Ji-heon was known for his equal rudeness towards all employees, more than anyone, Seung-kyu always felt a sense of pity for him.

But now, for the first time, he felt resentment toward his friend.

“Do you think I’m a joke?”

“I never said I found you funny. I said I liked you.”

“No, you think I’m a joke. Deep down, you’ll always think that. Do you really think I don’t see your duplicity?”

Seung-kyu also spoke words he had held back for a long time about the person he had been watching for years, Jung Ji-heon.

“You’re like this in everything. You abandon the best option you could easily choose and opt for the second-best. You can always invest 100 or even 150, yet you only put in 80. You could be first, but you settle for second or third. That’s you. You don’t put effort into anything or any relationship. Your life is easy, isn’t it?”

Looking at Ji-heon reminded Seung-kyu of a battery that discharges automatically once it’s charged to 80%.

Without giving his all, he finds a compromise at a comfortable point and quietly holds his ground.

He purposely lowers the world’s expectations and lives life comfortably while merely going through the motions.

But was that really a comfortable life?

Is a life lived only in pretense truly comfortable?

That’s why he had given his affection. Because he felt so sorry for his friend.

Even on the day when he had lost all the memories accumulated over three years and woke up, Ji-heon had remained calm and silent.

“You have nothing valuable. Everyone who has passed you by is trivial to you.”

Despite Seung-kyu’s harsh assessment, Ji-heon’s expression didn’t change.

It was as if he was indifferent to losing a friend.

Seung-kyu felt a pang of sorrow as he uttered such harsh words.

Though he blamed Ji-heon, he couldn’t bring himself to hate him. Stupidly so.

***

“Still, I support you.”

“…”

“You may not believe it, but even in this moment of anger, I support you, you bastard. I can’t understand why you live like that, but I still think of you as my friend.”

You’ll never know how much I cherish you, how much I feel sorry for you. Forever.

“I’m not your mother; I’m on your side. You jerk.”

With that, Seung-kyu poured out his heart and left the office.

Bang.

He slammed the door intentionally.

Yet his steps felt heavy as he left.

He thought he had emptied his heart, but some feelings still clung to him like a lingering regret.

***

A few minutes later, the kindergarten teacher rushed in, looking flustered.

“I’m really sorry for leaving Ye-na behind. It was entirely my fault.”

The kindergarten teacher bowed repeatedly, tears streaming down her face.

While the mistake had indeed originated from the kindergarten, it was hard for Jung-oh to remain angry with the teacher given her heartfelt apology.

“It’s alright. But this can never happen again. It would be inconvenient, but could you please call the academy a few minutes before you arrive?”

“Yes. I will do that from now on.”

If a problem arose and was barely resolved, the focus now had to be on prevention.

She had received a promise from the police to work on prevention as well, so she should trust them and ease her worries.

With a relieved expression, Jung-oh picked up Ye-na’s kindergarten bag. It felt like something was inside, so she shook it.

“Mom, there’s a drawing in the bag. We made a zoo at kindergarten today.”

Inside the bag was a paper frame labeled “Zoo.”

“What kind of animal is this?”

“That’s a deer.”

…Ye-na, do you really think this is a deer?

Whether it looked like a deer, a lion, or even a mantis, the fact that she had to recognize this creature with a green body and carnivorous teeth as a deer was amusing, and Jung-oh couldn’t help but laugh.

Meanwhile, she noticed a note sticking out of the front pocket of the bag.

Without thinking, Jung-oh pulled out the note.

The handwriting inside read…

– She looks like her mom and has her dad’s personality. A child who resembles both equally.

And playfully drawn was the logo of the Seonhyun Group…

Jung-oh’s previously calm smile shattered. It felt like her heart dropped to her feet.

Someone knows.

Someone knows that I gave birth to Jung Ji-heon’s child.

Ch15 - A Mother Grows Strong for Her Child

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Jin-seo took great care of Jung-oh and Ye-na, who were both shocked by the earlier incident.

Somehow, Jung-oh ended up getting a ride in Jin-seo's car to Guksun Baekban.

"Thank you for bringing us here. Since you've come all this way, why don't you join us for dinner?"

"Oh, really? Thank you."

Jin-seo cheerfully accepted Jung-oh's invitation.

Ye-na was the first to open the restaurant door.

"Grandma!"

"Oh my, my puppy!"

Guksun opened her arms wide to embrace her granddaughter.

Her face was filled with joy, and tears were welling up in her eyes. After receiving Jung-oh's message, Guksun had been anxiously worried.

"Did my puppy get hurt at all?"

"No!"

“Thank goodness we found you so quickly. What would we have done if we lost this beautiful girl…”

Guksun rubbed her cheek against Ye-na’s.

“Mom, this is Do-bin’s mother, a friend from Ye-na’s academy. She helped us find Ye-na today.”

“Hello, ma’am.”

As Guksun was hugging Ye-na, she stood up upon Jung-oh’s introduction.

“Oh! Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Guksun took Jin-seo’s hands in both of hers, shaking them while bowing her head again, causing Jin-seo to feel a bit flustered and bow her head as well.

“Our Ye-na mentioned Do-bin. It’s so nice to see you!”

“What did Ye-na say about Do-bin?”

Do-bin chimed in during Guksun’s greeting.

“So you’re Do-bin?”

Guksun looked at Do-bin adorably and patted his head.

“Do-bin said you’re his friend.”

A smile blossomed on Do-bin’s face. He was pleased to learn that the usually aloof and indifferent Ye-na referred to him as a friend, no matter how he expressed himself.

Soon, a hearty dinner was served.

Guksun pushed two tables together and brought out various side dishes.

“Let’s eat deliciously. Thank you.”

“I hope it suits the kids’ tastes.”

It was a good opportunity for Do-bin to score points with Ye-na’s grandmother. He took a big spoonful of rice, something he would never do at home.

Jin-seo watched Do-bin with a warm smile and said to Guksun,

“My mother ran a business nearby as well. She did it for a long time.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Do you know the Jin-seo Flower Shop? It was located straight down the market intersection six years ago.”

“I know, I know! You were the daughter of that shop? Now that you mention it, I think I’ve seen you before!”

“I feel the same way. From the moment I stepped into the restaurant, I felt like I knew you well.”

“How is your mother?”

“She’s well. She’s currently wrapping up her work and has gone to the countryside to farm with my dad.”

“I see. Back then, you two were such a sweet couple. Ah, what a coincidence, what a coincidence. It’s nice to meet you. Your son and daughter look so bright.”

While the two women continued their conversation, Jung-oh was deep in thought.

Should I tell the police? Would they believe me if I did?

She couldn’t dismiss the note found in Ye-na’s kindergarten bag as mere coincidence. However, it felt too hasty to ask for police help, adding weight to her suspicions.

If she explained the note, it could reveal her connection to Jung Ji-heon, potentially putting Ye-na in danger.

In any case, the police had said they would track down the suspicious woman who had taken Ye-na, so for now, she had to trust them and wait.

‘That note and the Seonhyun Group logo could just be a joke or coincidence. It’s entirely possible.’

Also, the note wasn’t a threat; it was simply a statement of fact, so there was no need to be scared.

Let’s not be tense and think calmly about the future.

Jung-oh quietly reassured herself.

Jin-seo was respectful towards Guksun and warm to Jung-oh.

She didn’t even ask Jung-oh what Ye-na’s father did for a living. That alone made Jung-oh think of Jin-seo as a good person.

“I wanted to implement systematic parenting, but it hasn’t gone as planned. I’ve read a lot of books and watched many parenting shows. I’ve gathered a lot of information in my head, but applying it in real life is a different story. During those times, I feel really helpless.”

While watching the children play, Jin-seo opened up about her current worries.

“Do you work right now?”

“Yes.”

“That’s impressive. Really.”

“…”

“The academy teacher praises Ye-na so much. You work so well and raise such smart kids. You’re amazing.”

I’m just doing what I like. Raising two kids seems much harder. Jin-seo’s compliments made Jung-oh feel a bit awkward.

“But I wouldn’t know what to do if something like today happens again. I ran out of the company when I heard that my child was missing.”

“Of course. That’s understandable. So, Ye-na’s mother…”

As if it were a lengthy conversation, Jin-seo lowered her voice for a moment.

“What if I pick her up after the academy? No, I could even pick up Ye-na along with Do-bin after his kindergarten. The Kkokkoori Kindergarten and the Sonamu Kindergarten are close by, right?”

“Ah…”

“Then they can play at my place until you finish at the restaurant, and I’ll drop them off after.”

“…”

“I’ll feed them and take pictures to send you in between. Actually, I used to be a nutritionist. I’m confident I can provide balanced nutrition for the kids.”

When Jung-oh hesitated again, Jin-seo’s expression darkened.

“I’m not asking for anything in return. …The truth is, Do-bin likes Ye-na. Whenever Ye-na is mentioned, he becomes more mature. I just want them to spend time together, reading and playing. I feel bad for being so transparent, but I think Do-bin can learn a lot from being around Ye-na…”

Jin-seo sincerely shared her feelings.

“I understand that after what happened today, it’s hard to trust people right away. Especially since she’s a daughter and not a son…”

“No. It’s not like that. Ye-na mentioned Do-bin too. I trust you. It’s not that I don’t believe you; I just worry that it might be hard for you…”

“No, it’s not hard at all.”

As Jung-oh expressed her concern for Jin-seo, she waved her hands frantically.

“Then how about this? Just try it for a day as I asked. Just one day.”

Her eyes sparkled again. There was something heart-wrenchingly earnest about her friendly voice.

“I’ll make sure they don’t fight and I’ll do my best to ensure Ye-na doesn’t feel left out.”

Jung-oh felt a tightness in her chest.

How wonderful to ask for help in taking care of a child.

Could there be anyone more grateful than this?

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The next morning.

It was a morning that could not be taken lightly.

Given that such a big incident happened yesterday, today, the daycare teacher and the Go academy instructor would likely pay a bit more attention, but there was still no room for complacency.

As Jeong-oh prepared for Ye-na’s daycare, she reminded her several times.

“Ye-na, you can’t talk to just anyone, okay?”

“Okay!”

Ye-na’s response was confident. Still, her mother couldn’t easily relax.

“Even if someone offers you something delicious, you shouldn’t go with them, alright?”

“Okay!”

“If you don’t like something, you have to say you don’t like it. Can you do that?”

“Okay!”

“Are you going to say you understand and then not listen again?”

“Okay! No, no!”

Her mechanical replies confirmed her mother’s concerns.

“Ye-na, if a stranger comes up to you saying they hurt their arm and need help with their stuff, what will you do?”

“I’ll help them!”

It was clear that asking children to be cautious was an uphill battle. If an adult with bad intentions lured a child using all kinds of tricks, the child would be helpless.

Adults are not free from the world’s temptations, so how much more would innocent children be vulnerable? There was nothing to do but protect them well.

Amidst her worries, Ye-na, having sweet-talked her grandmother into getting an ice cube, bit down on it near Jeong-oh’s ear.

“What are you doing, Ye-na?”

“ASMR.”

It was a sound she only shared with people she liked.

Jeong-oh pulled Ye-na closer and sat her down to give her a serious talk.

“Ye-na, it’s wrong for an adult to ask a child for help. You don’t have to help strangers, alright?”

“Okay!”

“Do you understand what Mom is saying?”

“Okay!”

After being so startled yesterday, her daughter was remarkably brave today.

She wanted to protect that innocent cheerfulness. That was Jeong-oh’s true feeling.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Since she had unexpectedly left work early yesterday, Jeong-oh had to work even harder today.

Arriving at work early, Jeong-oh set down her things and, on her way to the restroom, noticed Ji-heon’s secretary.

The secretary greeted Jeong-oh first.

“Good morning, Assistant Manager.”

“Hello, Aera.”

“Have you seen the Director?”

“Pardon?”

“I left a note. Didn’t you see it?”

“Oh… I didn’t see it. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Director Jeong Ji-heon has been looking for you since yesterday. You should go see him now. He’s in his office.”

“Okay, thank you.”

After exchanging pleasantries with the secretary, Jeong-oh suddenly realized she had completely forgotten about Ji-heon.

She had pushed aside her thoughts of him yesterday, preoccupied with worries about Ye-na.

Although her concerns for Ye-na were ultimately connected to Ji-heon, she hadn’t allowed herself to be confused by the meaning behind his every action.

She had even forgotten that he was waiting for her in his office.

‘If he waited a long time, he might be upset.’

It was unfortunate, and while she couldn’t make an expression like a guilty sinner, she felt a pang of regret.

Jeong-oh headed straight to Ji-heon’s office.

Knocking softly, she waited for a response, but there was no sound from inside. Reluctantly, she stepped inside.

“Um…”

Trying to appear cautious, she quietly called out, but then immediately closed her mouth.

Ji-heon was asleep. In fact, he was sprawled out on the sofa.

Jeong-oh hesitated, wondering if she should quietly leave, but then she paused and carefully stepped closer.

Did he have a lot of work? Was he really tired?

She had thought he had changed completely, but his sleeping form remained the same.

Thick eyebrows, a sharp nose without any curve, a distinct philtrum, and a well-defined mouth.

Above all, without his sharply critical words and piercing gaze, he didn’t seem cold. She even felt a pang of sympathy.

A person who didn’t even know what he had lost, someone very pitiable.

Thinking of her beautifully grown Ye-na, she felt even sorrier for him for not being able to witness those years.

‘Can I show our Ye-na to you?’

You’ve changed so much, haven’t you?

You’re trying to live a new life now, right?

You’re about to get married to your girlfriend, aren’t you?

Thinking of the faintest risk made her want to completely shut her heart, but she couldn’t.

She had to be sure who was threatening her daughter.

‘Is your mother behind you?’

What does your mother know? Does she know about Ye-na too?

Can your aides be trusted?

She needed to dig deeper into this man’s associates.

And about him as well…

Seeing his gently closed eyes made her heart soften again. The temptation to poke around stirred inside her.

But he was no longer someone she could mess with.

She couldn’t break his life for her own desires.

Still, she wanted him to meet Ye-na.

“Jeong Ji-heon. I don’t know how our lives will unfold, but wait. Just wait a little longer.”

Until I find out who the culprit is.

First, I need to understand his surroundings and ensure Ye-na’s safety.

Everything comes after that.

“One day, I will definitely make you meet our Ye-na.”

Although she had made a firm resolution, her already softened heart turned liquid. A single tear fell onto his face. Jeong-oh was startled and hurriedly wiped the tear away with the back of her hand.

“Don’t cry. Lee Jeong-oh.

No one can wipe your tears away.

You have to solve this yourself.”

With a solemn determination, Jeong-oh turned around.

But then…

“Where are you going?”

His heavy voice grabbed Jeong-oh’s ankle like a shackle.

“Where are you going after all this?”

He was awake.

Ch 16 - That Wasn't a Kiss

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Recently, there had been nothing that annoyed him this much.

Lee Jeong-oh, who had said he had something to discuss, had left without a word after saying he'd make a phone call, only to leave for the day.

Park Seung-gyu, who claimed to be his close friend, turned his back as if they'd never see each other again.

Both of these people were tormenting his mind, to the point where Jiheon couldn't even sleep.

But still, he had to work, so he went to the office. On his way to his office, he stopped briefly and looked at Jeong-oh's desk from a distance. It seemed like Jeong-oh hadn't arrived yet.

He could hear the voices of Chae Eun-bi and her colleagues coming from the breakroom. Jiheon moved toward his office.

"Director, you're here."

"Yes."

He answered the assistant's greeting absentmindedly and moved inside the office.

After sitting on the sofa for a while, his head hurt so much that he laid down.

Soon after, he heard soft footsteps outside the office.

Thinking it was Chae Eun-bi, Jiheon closed his eyes. He was so irritated, he didn’t want to exchange even a word with her.

The door opened, and someone entered. If someone was lying on the sofa, it would be polite to leave immediately, assuming they were tired, but the woman stood still in front of him. Her presence irritated him, and Jiheon furrowed his brow slightly.

The approaching footsteps grew more suspicious.

He could feel a heated presence, as if she was observing him from beside his head. The faint sound of breath seemed like it was wishing for his peace.

Her breath brushing against his skin felt ticklish. He clenched his fingers around the edges of the sofa.

He felt the urge to face the person, but he resisted, fearing he would regret it if he opened his eyes.

Then, something hot and damp lightly pressed against his lips.

As the warmth seeped between his lips like a brand, Jiheon felt his body heat up. The woman seemed startled. He felt her hastily pull away.

‘What am I doing right now?’

Jiheon couldn’t hold back and opened his eyes suddenly.

And he recognized Lee Jeong-oh’s back.

He had pretended to sleep, thinking it was Chae Eun-bi and that he didn’t want to talk, but it was Jeong-oh.

“Where are you going?”

“……”

“Where are you going, after doing this?”

Jiheon swiftly grabbed her.

“Uh… I didn’t do anything…”

She responded with a flustered expression, turning her head. Her usually pale face was now flushed. Jiheon immediately stood up.

She cheekily began to back away slowly, probably trying to run away through the door at some point.

Jiheon quickly stepped forward, blocking the exit.

When the passage was blocked, her face twisted with panic.

He even found that expression attractive.

It was his taste.

It was a little humiliating to admit, but it was definitely his preference.

Even in this situation, his mind and body both wanted to touch her—this was a very clear preference.

Soon, his body would cross a certain limit. His mind sent a warning. Being with this woman was dangerous.

He could avoid situations where they were alone together, and he could have her removed from the company, but he didn’t want that.

If that’s the case, he would just have to get used to the stimuli she gave him.

He wanted her closer, by his side.

He hoped she would make a mistake. He planned to delve into that mistake.

So, he couldn’t miss this opportunity.

“I don’t want to cause a big problem, so how are you going to take responsibility?”

“Pardon? What do you mean?”

“……”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She responded nonchalantly, pretending she didn’t know anything.

Jiheon’s lips twisted at her cheeky response.

Should I push further?

“Well, I guess I don’t know either.”

“……”

“I’ve experienced a lot of things, but this is the first time I’ve been kissed while sleeping.”

Jiheon smirked as he ran his thumb over his lips.

Jeong-oh was at a loss for words.

Is he an idiot? What does one drop of tear have to do with a kiss?

“That wasn’t a kiss…”

“Right. It wasn’t a kiss, it was just a peck.”

As Jiheon continued to press his point, Jeong-oh had no choice but to admit it.

“…It was a tear, Director.”

“……”

“Neither a kiss nor a peck, just a single tear that dropped.”

His brow furrowed, looking as though he still couldn’t believe it. Of course, it was probably just for show.

“How could you misunderstand that? You look like someone who’s never even had a peck.”

Pervert. Anyone who saw him would think he’d never even kissed before.

“Then why?”

“Pardon?”

“Why? Why did you drop a single tear in front of me?”

“That is…”

Jeong-oh squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again.

I don’t know either. Let whatever happen, happen.

“It’s because… you resemble my father, who passed away!”

His expression turned even more grim than before. It looked like he was in shock.

But soon, he took two steps forward, narrowing his eyes slightly.

“Are you asking me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth.”

“How much, and in what way, do I resemble him?”

Damn it.

“Do you have a picture of your father?”

He had just sold his nonexistent father to get out of a tight spot.

Jeong-oh had to come up with a new plan.

‘He said he hates being called handsome, right?’

He remembered what Miran had said on his first day at work.

“He’s just handsome, just like my dad. My dad was really handsome.”

There. I’ve made you upset, now glare at me. Go ahead, look at me like I’m a bug.

Criticize me! Throw me out!

Throw me out already!

But contrary to Jeong-oh’s expectations, he took a step back without saying a word.

As if trying to calm himself down, a long, rough exhale escaped his tightly shut lips.

Well, it seems like the improvisation worked. Jeong-oh slowly moved in a half-circle, positioning himself by the door. He made sure his body didn’t move until he could grab the doorknob.

I’m sorry for lying, but this is acceptable, right?

You’ve hidden your true self from me too.

I didn’t know for seven years who you really were, what kind of person you were.

Jeong-oh twisted the doorknob behind him.

“I’ll be going now.”

“You said you had something to say yesterday.”

He, who had been silent, spoke again, almost as though trying to stop her from leaving.

“Oh, that was…”

“……”

“It’s that you resemble my father, who passed away. Now, I’ll really be going.”

Is that good enough?

Creeeak.

He had already cracked open the door, but he stupidly added one more thing.

“I waited for 30 minutes. Yesterday.”

“You only waited 30 minutes?”

The words slipped out before he could stop them, and as soon as he said them, he felt dizzy.

But once the words left his mouth, he couldn’t take them back, so Jeong-oh quickly tried to rationalize his actions.

I’m not scared. I’m just going to walk out.

I’m someone who knows about your scandal from seven years ago!

“Of course, I was part of that scandal.”

With that final thought, Jeong-oh hurriedly made his exit.

He probably hadn’t heard anything like that before.

You must have thought that if you waited 30 minutes, I’d apologize and beg you not to do that again.

After I retorted like that, you must think I’m crazy.

But that’s how Jeong-oh truly felt in his heart.

‘I’ve waited for so long for you, and you’re complaining about just 30 minutes?’

Though he rationalized it, his heart kept racing.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Yesterday afternoon, Eun-bi noticed that the secretary was lingering near the Production Team 2’s office.

The whole team was in a meeting, so the office was empty.

“Aera, what’s going on?”

“Oh, yes, Manager. I just have a memo to leave.”

If the secretary was leaving a memo, it must have been from Ji-heon.

At first, Eun-bi thought the secretary was leaving a memo for Mi-ran. But the secretary placed the memo on Jeong-oh’s desk.

‘Why would he send a memo to Jeong-oh?’

After the secretary left, Eun-bi quickly stood up and went to Jeong-oh’s desk.

The memo was sitting in the middle of the desk.

– 5/13 18:00 Director Jeong Ji-heon’s call.

‘Why?’

Eun-bi clenched her fist around the memo, and her expression grew dark.

She crumpled the paper tightly and threw it in the trash.

The next morning, while watching Production Team 2, Eun-bi saw Jeong-oh leave Ji-heon’s office and sit back down, and immediately called him over.

“Assistant Manager Jeong-oh.”

“Yes, Manager.”

“Could you come over for a moment?”

Jeong-oh stood up and walked over to Eun-bi.

Though he wanted to snap at her to come over if she had something to say, he decided to hold back since there were people around.

“Yes, Manager. What’s going on?”

“Where did you go yesterday?”

“I had an urgent matter, so I left early.”

“It’s not just you who has urgent matters. Everyone is busy, you know that?”

“Yes. I’m sorry I couldn’t contact you directly.”

Jeong-oh forced a smile, trying not to show his displeasure.

But when he smiled, Eun-bi looked even more irritated.

“After the meeting the day before yesterday, we assigned roles for the historical ad study. Your portion, which was supposed to be handled by you, was taken over by me and the other team members, and it was a hassle.”

Eun-bi tapped her finger on the documents on her desk, subtly emphasizing each word to make it seem like everything she said was important.

“I did it, Manager.”

At this point, Jeong-oh couldn’t stay silent anymore.

“My portion was uploaded directly to the cloud right after the meeting the day before yesterday.”

Jeong-oh handed her the document she had tapped on.

Ironically, aside from the cover page, the content was exactly what Jeong-oh had written.

If you’re going to try to deceive someone, at least put in more effort.

“The document you’re looking at is mine, not the one the team members prepared. Did you properly check the contents, Manager?”

Eun-bi froze.

The night before, she had assumed Jeong-oh wasn’t at the meeting and had left early without handling his tasks, so she hadn’t thought that the documents printed by the other team members could be his.

Furthermore, Ji-heon had left a note for Jeong-oh, making her uneasy.

At this point, Jeong-oh was supposed to back down.

Eun-bi, hiding her flustered emotions, responded quickly.

“You should have sent it by email. That’s the proper way to check it.”

“We decided in the meeting the day before yesterday to upload it to the cloud for the PT preparations, Manager. You can check the meeting minutes.”

Jeong-oh found Eun-bi’s reaction amusing.

“It seems like everyone else checked it properly. Anyway, I’ll be more careful from now on to make sure there’s nothing missed that you can’t properly check, Manager.”

Eun-bi. Now, I won’t let you pull the same stunt you did when you ruined my school life.

I have a lot to do here.

I need to earn money and also make sure our Ye-na gets to meet her father.

But I don’t plan on stealing your man.

However, if you threaten me, I won’t stay quiet.

Don’t bother me. Don’t try to ruin my workplace.

Protecting myself is protecting my daughter.

I’ll defeat my enemies to protect myself.

Chae Eun-bi, you’re the same. If you slander me, you’re my enemy.

Anything that stands in my way is my enemy.

Ch 17 - Father and Daughter

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A week full of ups and downs had passed, and the weekend had flown by in the blink of an eye. Now, it was Monday.

Today was a special day for Ye-na.

It was the day she was invited to Do-bin’s house. The request Ji-seo made last week had been fulfilled.

Ji-seo had invited Ye-na with a joyful heart, but in truth, Jeong-oh wasn’t entirely at ease. There was a gap between ideals and reality, and he worried that Ye-na might cause trouble and make things uncomfortable for Ji-seo and Do-bin.

Honestly, Jeong-oh had planned to just accept Ji-seo’s kind gesture, but since Ye-na had expressed a strong desire to go to Do-bin’s house, he had no choice but to let his daughter go.

“Do you really want to go to Do-bin’s house?”

“Yes!”

“Why do you want to go?”

“Just because. I’m curious.”

“If you cause any trouble, you’ll have to come back right away, okay?”

“Okay!”

“You’re only playing for today, alright?”

“Okay!”

Ye-na answered cheerfully as always. Even so, Jeong-oh couldn’t shake the feeling of unease.

It would be nice if he could spend the whole day looking after his daughter.

The mandatory overtime at his company felt a bit harsh.

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Seung-gyu’s life didn’t feel like life at all.

Last Thursday, when he had snapped at his superior and friend Ji-heon, he had honestly been prepared to quit his job.

He had a family—growing children, a wife whose laughter had become less frequent as she took care of them, and a 20-year mortgage looming over him every hour.

Now, another Monday morning arrived, and he had to go to work again. He didn’t want to go, but quitting wasn’t an option.

His wife seemed oddly happy, humming a tune as she fried anchovies.

Trying not to upset her, Seung-gyu gingerly approached and said, “Honey, I love you.”

“Why? Did you run out of allowance again?”

Ji-seo asked gruffly. The wife who smiled so gently at the anchovies was now as cold as ice toward him.

“You always think it’s about the allowance.”

“Stop talking nonsense and get to work. And when the kids arrive, you should go out for a while.”

“When the kids are here, why should I leave? I’m their father.”

“Do-bin’s friend is coming with him. A girl.”

“Ye-na?”

“Yes. When you invite a girl over, dads are supposed to quietly step aside, so they’re not in the way while the kids play.”

“I want to see Ye-na too.”

“Too bad, you can’t.”

“That’s too much! It’s too much!”

Work and home—his life was anything but easy.

He had no one to rely on.

But at least Ji-heon would have a drink with him if he were around, but after what he said…

Seung-gyu turned with slumped shoulders.

But then Ji-seo called him again.

“Honey.”

“Yes?”

“Just come home early.”

A glimmer of life returned to Seung-gyu’s tired eyes.

Ah, Ji-seo, you’re the only one for me, he thought as he prepared to confess his love.

“Come home, clean the air conditioner, and then go out again. We don’t want Ye-na to be too hot.”

Ah, Ji-seo…

When he had complained that it was too hot, she didn’t budge, but now, just because her son’s friend was coming over, she was going to turn on the air conditioning?

It was a frustrating morning.

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The commute on Monday morning was always a struggle, but once at work, the day passed in a flash.

The Monday magic had worked on Production Team 2.

Team Leader Seong Mi-ran and Deputy Director Park Yeong-gwang left for the editing room, leaving only the junior team members to hold down the fort.

As evening approached, Jeong-oh felt suddenly down.

He was hungry. But out of loyalty, he couldn’t say he would go out alone to eat.

The two graphic designers were busy making final edits on the media advertisement. The client wanted it sent by late tonight, so it was the top priority.

Jeong-oh, trying to be discreet, took a cookie out of his drawer and ate it. It was the cookie Ji-heon had given him last week.

Hmm, it tastes good. Ji-heon almost threw this away…

There was only one cookie, so he savored it slowly, but suddenly, he heard a chuckle from the side.

“Now that I think about it, Assistant Manager, you really eat a lot, but somehow, you don’t gain weight.”

Ki-hoon said.

Jeong-oh felt wronged. When did he eat so much?

Jeong-oh chuckled lightly and played along with Ki-hoon’s comment.

“That’s what they call bad metabolism. But I’ve been trying to manage it these days. After having a child…”

Jeong-oh almost revealed a secret without thinking but quickly sealed his lips.

Ki-hoon, turning his head, asked, “What?”

“Ki-hoon, are you busy? If you don’t have time for dinner, I can bring you a sandwich.”

“Oh, that sounds great. Thanks.”

Jeong-oh smoothly recovered the situation, and Ki-hoon, being naive, didn’t notice anything unusual.

Finally, he would be able to eat! Jeong-oh, feeling a sense of triumph, also asked Eun-joo.

“What about you, Assistant Manager Ko? What would you like to eat?”

“I have plans. I’m meeting a friend after finishing work in two hours.”

“Then I’ll just grab something light for myself.”

With a happy heart, Jeong-oh got up from his seat.

‘I’ll call Do-bin’s house on the way back,’ he thought.

He was curious if Ye-na had arrived safely at Do-bin’s house, if she was having fun, and if everything was okay.

As he walked lightly toward the elevator, a man suddenly appeared, taking away his bright smile.

“…Hello, Director.”

Jeong-oh realized that the reason he was feeling so good today was that he hadn’t run into Ji-heon yet.

It felt like a dark cloud suddenly arrived on this fresh evening.

Ji-heon was leaving the office early while the staff were stuck with overtime.

Well, at least it was better than sitting there while others worked overtime.

At Jeong-oh’s greeting, Ji-heon only nodded and entered the elevator that had just arrived.

An elevator ride with just the two of them.

“Are you not getting on?”

Ji-heon asked as he held the elevator door open, looking at Jeong-oh, who hesitated.

Jeong-oh wanted to refuse fiercely, but couldn’t bring himself to do it.

He let out a bitter sigh and stepped into the elevator.

Once the doors closed, it felt suffocating. He silently prayed.

Please, someone, get on. Please, someone, get on.

And then, miraculously, the doors opened on the eighth floor.

Jeong-oh’s face lit up as he saw the person outside.

It was Ji-heon’s 16-year-old friend, Deputy Director Park Seung-gyu!

If he overheard their conversation, he might be able to get some information about Ji-heon. It was a great opportunity.

However, for some reason, Seung-gyu hesitated before getting on the elevator.

“Deputy Director Park! Get on! Get on!”

But Seung-gyu only gave a faint greeting with a dark expression.

“I’ll take the next one. You go ahead.”

What was this? Was there a rift between them?

Could two grown men, at 33 years old, be fighting?

Seven years ago, Jeong-oh couldn’t have imagined it, but somehow, now, it seemed plausible with the current Ji-heon…

It was still surprising, though.

“Did you two have a fight?”

Unable to hold back his curiosity, Jeong-oh blurted out.

“How did that happen? With someone like him, who seems like an angel.”

Having become a little bolder since learning about Ji-heon’s past seven years ago, Jeong-oh was now able to speak more freely.

Despite Jeong-oh’s bold question, Ji-heon only scowled, not answering.

So they did fight.

I need Deputy Director Park Seung-gyu, though.

“I don’t think Deputy Director Park would have done anything wrong…” Jeong-oh ventured.

Ji-heon shot him a glare.

It’s because of you.

Ji-heon couldn’t bring himself to speak the truth about the words he’d said in anger over her matter.

Jeong-oh, sensing Ji-heon’s discomfort, stopped pushing further.

“It was an overstep on my part. I guess I’m just like my father, always worrying too much. I’m sorry.”

“Is that what daughters are like?”

“What?”

“Is it that daughters are so fond of their fathers?”

Jeong-oh spoke awkwardly, but to his surprise, Ji-heon understood it so perfectly.

It seemed Jeong-oh’s little play would continue a bit longer.

“…That’s right.”

“…”

“Daughters are like that. They are very fond of their fathers.”

Ji-heon quietly nodded.

Jeong-oh couldn’t tell whether he was imagining the close bond between a father and daughter, or if he was thinking about his emotional struggles with Seung-gyu.

Jeong-oh, carefully but boldly, threw in another opinion.

“By the way, why don’t you try making up? Deputy Director Park really cares about you.”

Ji-heon looked up at her, staring intently.

Deputy Director Park was someone Jeong-oh needed as well, so she hoped Ji-heon would patch things up with his friend.

“Maybe you should visit him directly and try to have a conversation. Don’t you think so? He’s a precious friend, after all.”

But it was sincere advice.

It was like speaking to his past self.

If I had been more persistent and hadn’t given up seven years ago, if I had trusted you more instead of being disappointed, would things be different now?

“You can’t just cut a ribbon you care about with scissors just because the knot is tied.”

If that had happened, wouldn’t we be living a different today?

“Maybe we should slowly untangle it, little by little?”

Jeong-oh’s chest ached as he conveyed his thoughts.

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After feeding the children dinner and doing the dishes, Jin-seo couldn’t hide her contentment. Her cheekbones rose with a smile.

Ye-na was so pretty and capable, and with Ye-na around, her son ate well and listened carefully.

She wished Ye-na would come every day.

“Look, the jelly sparkles, just like your eyes.”

After they finished eating, she handed her son a pack of jelly, and he was trying to woo his girlfriend like this.

Where did he learn such expressions? She was so proud of him.

I used to be like that too.

“But why hasn’t this guy come to clean the air conditioner yet?”

Even amidst that thought, she couldn’t help but feel frustrated with her husband, gripping the dish in her hand tighter.

Just as she finished the dishes, the doorbell rang.

“Who could it be? No one was supposed to come…”

Jin-seo looked at the video phone screen and was startled.

There, standing outside the door, was her husband’s much older boss, his high school and college classmate, and his military junior—Ji-heon.

“My goodness, what’s this? What do I do?”

Jin-seo stomped her feet in a panic before opening the door.

“Oh my, Ji-heon, hello!”

She had once been told to call him by his name casually, but since he was her husband’s much older boss, she couldn’t help but act respectfully both in body and mind.

“Hello. It’s been a while.”

“It really has. Ho ho ho, it’s been so long. Please come in.”

“Thank you. I’ll come in now.”

Ji-heon entered and handed a large basket he had been holding to Jin-seo.

“I bought some fruit.”

“Oh my, ho ho ho… you really didn’t have to. Thank you. I’ll enjoy it. … But what brings you here?”

“I came to meet Seung-gyu. Is he home? He left work early.”

Jin-seo had told her husband to stay out since Ye-na was coming over, so it seemed her husband was sulking.

“He hasn’t come yet. He should be nearby. I’ll give him a call.”

“Thank you.”

“Please come on in.”

Ji-heon hesitated for a moment but then entered the house.

Do-yoon waddled over, and Do-bin came out of his room to intervene.

“Mom, who’s here?”

“Do-bin, say hello. It’s your dad’s friend, Uncle Ji-heon. You know him, right?”

“Hello.”

“Right, hello.”

Ji-heon accepted Do-bin’s greeting and looked over his shoulder, noticing that Seung-gyu had two children, not just one, as he had thought. There was a boy and a girl, so three in total.

As Ji-heon wondered about this, Do-bin spoke up first.

“I also have a friend here.”

“Do-bin, when you say that, you should say ‘I have a friend here,’” Jin-seo gently corrected.

“I have a friend here.”

Jin-seo added her own explanation.

“His friend came over.”

“Oh, a girlfriend?”

“Did Do-bin’s dad mention it?”

“Yes, he mentioned it once.”

Had he said that his son was head over heels for her? Or that he fell in love at first sight?

Thinking about it now, the conflict with Seung-gyu started with that conversation.

Was Seung-gyu’s expression really so wrong? It was just that Jin-seo had gotten defensive and ended up saying things she shouldn’t have.

The little girl looked up at him with wide, round eyes.

The child, though just a quick glance, was exceptionally cute and pretty.

Ji-heon found himself staring at her a little longer.

The little girl, standing a few steps away, seemed to poke at his eyes, making Ji-heon squint and blink rapidly.

He continued to watch the small girl, who, after staring at him, shrank back, turning her head stiffly.

Feeling like he had caused the child to become scared, Ji-heon quietly stepped back.

Still, he couldn’t take his eyes off her face.

Her white, delicate face reminded him of someone.

‘All children are beautiful.’

He knew that, but still, his eyes stung a little.

Ch 18 - No Dad Around

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The bangs that covered her forehead, her pale face, round eyes, and the full lips that moved decisively every time she spoke—she was such a pretty child that she could be mistaken for a doll.

The little girl held up a doll that Do-bin's younger brother, Do-yoon, had been playing with and said to Do-bin,

"She's pretty."

"You're prettier."

"I know."

So this is how kids are these days.

Ji-heon quietly held his breath, not wanting to interrupt.

He began to understand Seung-gyu's feelings a little more. He thought he could understand Do-bin's feelings as well.

For some reason, he couldn't stop looking at the little girl.

He couldn't explain it clearly, but her face kept resurfacing in his mind these past few days, oddly overlapping with someone else's.

Was this how you fall in love at first sight?

Was Jeong-oh simply someone whose face made it easy to fall in love at first sight?

Or was it just that if someone is pretty, Ji-heon thought they must resemble Jeong-oh?

As he stared, the little girl also looked back at him.

Feeling it would be impolite to stare, Ji-heon quickly turned his head away.

Jin-seo, flustered, pressed the call button several times.

“Hello, where are you, honey?”

After a few attempts, it seemed the call had gone through.

“You said you left early today, so why are you still there? Ji-heon is here at the house.”

Jin-seo quickly headed to the master bedroom while holding the phone.

“It’s Ji-heon, Ji-heon, the director!”

From the master bedroom, her voice, rising in pitch with each pause, made Ji-heon feel a bit uncomfortable.

He realized he should head to the parking lot.

Having entered the living room, Ji-heon turned to leave. As he reached the hallway, Do-bin grabbed his hand.

“Uncle, do you know how to play Go?”

“Uh… well, I know a little.”

“Come play Go with me.”

Before Ji-heon could properly answer, Do-bin grabbed his hand and started pulling him along. Ji-heon found himself being dragged along.

Do-bin, holding tightly onto Ji-heon’s hand, led him to the Go board. While Ye-na wasn’t looking, Do-bin whispered to Ji-heon.

“I hope you let me win.”

The desire of a young boy to look good in front of his girlfriend.

Ji-heon, who was about to leave the house, found himself in a difficult spot, but he had no choice. He was in the position of earning some points with his friend’s son.

“Do you know how to play Go?”

“Yes, I learned it at the academy.”

Do-bin confidently carried the Go board and pieces as he answered.

The Go board was placed on the coffee table in the living room.

“Ye-na, look! I’m going to show you how to play Go.”

Ye-na, with curiosity in her eyes, came closer.

The two men sat across from each other at the table, and Ye-na sat next to Do-bin.

“Uncle goes first.”

Do-bin, looking nervous, spoke and sent a signal with his eyes. Ji-heon, who had been looking at the board, turned his gaze to Do-bin.

“No, black goes first.”

Ye-na, who had been watching, intervened.

“Ah, I know that.”

Following her words, Do-bin placed a black stone on the board.

Ji-heon placed a white stone beside it.

Then, Do-bin’s second move was a bit unexpected. That’s when Ji-heon couldn’t help but chuckle.

He had said he knew how to play Go, but it seemed like he only knew how to place stones on the board.

The kids probably wouldn’t notice, so Ji-heon just played along, letting Do-bin win.

However, things soon took an unexpected turn.

“No, no, it should go here. If you place it here, you won’t be able to block the path.”

The little girl, frustrated, began to give instructions from beside Do-bin.

Do-bin likely wasn’t planning that…

“Look, place it right here. Then the uncle will place his stone here. Then you place yours here.”

The little girl was surprisingly accurate in her reading of the game.

…Can a seven-year-old really do this? Wait, is she even seven?

Ji-heon was somewhat taken aback. His careless moves had turned into mistakes on the board.

“Then, what if I place it here?”

Ji-heon placed a white stone in a surprising position and asked the girl. The child thought for a moment before placing a stone a bit further away.

A few moves later, Ji-heon found himself in a position where he had no choice but to follow her lead.

The girl wasn’t just smart; she was remarkable. Ji-heon couldn’t help but think she might be a prodigy.

The game soon became Ye-na’s and Ji-heon’s.

Before long, Ji-heon had forgotten about waiting for his friend and became entirely focused on the game.

When he played Go with his father, there were always restrictions.

His father used Go as a tool to control his emotions. He used to say not to let anyone read his moves through his facial expressions.

So, whenever they played, he was always tense…

But now, watching the child in front of him, he found it enjoyable to observe her expressions.

As she thought deeply about her moves, the expression on her face subtly changed. The child didn’t get nervous in front of an adult and was solely focused on the game of Go.

The pure joy of playing Go, something Ji-heon hadn’t been able to experience as a child, was now being fully enjoyed by this little one.

Facing such a pure child made Ji-heon realize how long it had been since he had enjoyed Go himself.

For the first time, Ji-heon found himself considering the outcome of the game.

Should he lose by a hair, or should he win by a hair?

If he followed Do-bin’s request, losing would be the right thing to do, but somehow, he felt that letting her win might actually be better for her growth.

As he thought about it, Jin-seo approached, her voice full of excitement.

“Our Ye-na is really good, right? She’s so clever and cute, I can’t stand it.”

Jin-seo’s eyes shone with fan-like admiration.

A small smile crept onto Ji-heon’s lips.

“Mom, I need to poop.”

In the midst of all this, Do-yoon, who was four, grabbed Jin-seo’s leg and spoke up.

After Jin-seo and Do-yoon left, the room grew quiet, and Ji-heon spoke to Ye-na.

“Your name is Ye-na, right?”

“Yes.”

“Who taught you how to play Go?”

“My teacher.”

“Not your dad, but a teacher?”

“…I don’t have a dad.”

Ye-na hesitated for a moment before answering flatly. Ji-heon flinched. He had made an awkward mistake. A cold sweat ran down his back.

Do-bin, with a bright smile, turned to Ye-na and asked,

“Then, should we give you our dad?”

“No. It’s fine.”

Ahem. Ahem. As the children casually exchanged cool words, Ji-heon cleared his throat a few times.

Just then, his savior, Seung-gyu, arrived.

Seung-gyu still seemed upset, his face a little sullen.

“…What’s going on?”

“I came to see you.”

Ji-heon stood up and answered while apologizing to the children.

“I have to go now. You two can keep playing.”

Wanting to leave quickly out of embarrassment, Ji-heon was caught off guard when Ye-na suddenly looked up and stared at him.

“When will you come again, Uncle?”

“Why?”

“Because it’s fun.”

It seemed like she had long since forgotten about the talk of her father. Her expression was so serious that Ji-heon couldn’t answer for a moment.

“Can we meet again next Monday?”

“I have work then.”

“What about the Monday after?”

“I’ll be busy then too.”

“What about the Monday after that?”

If he kept rejecting her, it seemed like tears would eventually fall from her round eyes.

“We’ll play again.”

The child persisted, and Do-bin and Seung-gyu waited for Ji-heon’s response.

“Alright.”

And so, Ji-heon made an impulsive promise.

In three weeks, on Monday. Maybe the child would forget by then.

Ji-heon and Seung-gyu immediately left.

“I can’t stay long. My wife asked me to clean the air conditioner.”

After arriving early and saying he had come to meet Ji-heon, Seung-gyu spoke in a sulky tone, as Ji-heon kept his lips tightly sealed.

Seung-gyu didn’t mean to sound upset. He just knew that if he didn’t pressure Ji-heon, he wouldn’t say a word.

Seung-gyu still cared about Ji-heon. Even if their relationship had deteriorated, he couldn’t bring himself to hate Ji-heon.

Seung-gyu had always felt sorry for him.

‘He was fine seven years ago.’

Seven years ago, after Ji-heon’s military discharge, there was a time when his eyes were full of life. Seung-gyu thought maybe Ji-heon had finally straightened himself out, but that thought didn’t last long.

Because of the accident seven years ago, his precious friend had regressed again.

Some people said he was fully recovered now, that he was fine, but Seung-gyu thought differently.

Seven years ago. That terrible winter with his friend still seemed like it had never ended.

Outwardly, Ji-heon seemed fine, but inside, something deep within him was severely twisted.

Seung-gyu wanted to help him, but he didn’t know how.

All he could do was listen to his friend.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“For speaking so harshly to you.”

“Do you really think I’m on your mother’s side?”

“No, I don’t think that.”

“Hmph.”

“I really don’t.”

“Well, that’s hurtful!”

Seung-gyu snorted, venting his frustration.

“If I were on your mother’s side, I would have told you about you and Manager Choi Eun-bi long ago.”

As Seung-gyu poured out the grievance that had been weighing on him, Ji-heon slowly nodded, as if finally understanding.

“Emotions don’t always have to be all or nothing, you know? Even just a part of it can be enough to get completely ruined and painful. Just like Do-yoon crying so much over a tiny scratch on his fingernail.”

“…”

“You’re part of my life. Not the whole, but definitely an important part.”

Now, Seung-gyu was nearly on the verge of tears. Since the conflict that broke out on Thursday evening, right up until an hour ago, he had felt heartbroken and depressed. It was because his friend meant so much to him.

“You’re like that. So I really hope you’re truly happy.”

I hope your winter ends.

Ji-heon’s lips quietly curled into a soft smile as he listened silently.

“Thanks for coming to see me. I’m sorry for speaking harshly as well.”

In truth, just the fact that Ji-heon had come to see him was enough for Seung-gyu to let go of any lingering resentment.

“But how did you think to come to my house?”

“…”

“Is it because I’m important to you?”

“Yeah.”

Ji-heon just smiled.

He couldn’t bring himself to mention that it was due to advice he’d received from someone in the elevator. He knew his friend would tease him about it.

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After finishing his overtime, Jeong-o hastily made his way home.

Ye-na, Jin-seo, and Do-bin were standing in front of the house.

Ye-na ran up to him, calling his name loudly, and hugged his waist.

“Mom!”

Do-bin also greeted him warmly.

“Auntie, hello!”

It was a relief to see their bright expressions, but Jeong-o couldn’t shake the feeling of guilt.

“I could have come to pick you up, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. Ye-na had a great time today. She ate all her food, and as soon as she came, my kids listened really well.”

Jin-seo continued with a satisfied look on her face but paused, carefully changing her expression.

“Oh, and there’s something I need to tell you. My husband’s friend from work came over for a while. He didn’t stay long, but…”

Jin-seo spoke cautiously, glancing at Jeong-o, but Jeong-o didn’t seem overly bothered.

“I know you must be worried, and then suddenly a guest came, I’m sorry.”

Jeong-o appreciated that Jin-seo had been considerate enough to explain things first so there would be no misunderstandings.

“It’s okay. Thank you for explaining, with two teams of guests, it must have been a bit much.”

“It wasn’t difficult. Thank you for understanding.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking you for taking care of Ye-na. And I’m really grateful you contacted me first and sent pictures.”

Jeong-o thanked her again. It felt like meeting good people because of Ye-na.

On the way home, holding hands, Ye-na kept smiling happily.

Jeong-o affectionately asked,

“Was it that fun?”

“Yeah.”

“What was fun?”

“It’s a secret.”

“Are you keeping a secret from me?”

“Mom, I’m going to go again, not next Monday, but the Monday after that.”

Without answering the question, her little daughter proudly announced her plans.

“Is it okay to go to Do-bin’s house again?”

Decisions made first, asking permission later.

Jeong-o smiled wryly, as if she were seeing the Ji-heon of seven years ago.

Ch 19 - I Will Never Let You Go

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When one problem was solved, Ji-heon felt a little lighter.

Tuesday afternoon. After completing a task, Ji-heon was on his way to his office when he glanced toward the production team.

The seats of Production Team 2 were all empty.

With a little spare time, Ji-heon decided to find the meeting room where the liquor advertisement production meeting was being held.

From outside the room, he could hear the voices of two people.

“Team Leader, I’ve noticed you never put down your notebook. Do you record everything in your daily life?”

“No, there’s not much worth writing. I just keep thinking about things.”

“Team Leader, you’re the best copywriter I’ve met. I admit it, I admit it.”

“Ki-hoon, you always say that every time I do something.”

“You really deserve all the praise.”

It was the voices of Song Ki-hoon and Lee Jeong-o.

When he opened the door and entered, he saw the two of them sitting side by side at the back of the meeting room.

Ki-hoon, who had stopped talking, greeted him energetically.

“Good afternoon, Director.”

Jeong-o only nodded in return.

“When does the meeting start?”

“In 10 minutes.”

“Ki-hoon, please print the meeting notes from last week.”

“Yes.”

Ki-hoon stood up and left the room.

Now, only Ji-heon and Jeong-o were left in the meeting room. An uncomfortable silence fell.

The woman who had been so lively and chatting with Ki-hoon was now sitting in front of Ji-heon, keeping her lips tightly shut, making Ji-heon feel uneasy.

Her name was Ye-na, wasn’t it?

The way she lowered her gaze reminded him of the smart child from yesterday.

She had said her father was gone.

For the first time, Ji-heon thought deeply about a situation he couldn’t empathize with.

He wanted to do something for her, but he wasn’t sure what.

But if there was even a slight issue, he might as well take advantage of it.

He didn’t want to be her father, but if that was the only connection, what did it matter?

Ji-heon spoke quietly.

“If you miss your father, you can come.”

“Pardon?”

“You said I resemble your father. If I’m okay with it, you can come and see me.”

“Director, you?”

Jeong-o narrowed her eyebrows sharply and asked again.

“Director’s face?”

Is he crazy?

This situation is awkward enough already, why would I go see you?

“Don’t you like it? I said it out of concern for you.”

But this man was serious. He seemed fixated on the word “father.”

Anyway, he had to figure out his inner circle, so perhaps his suggestion would help.

“Thank you for saying that.”

With a lukewarm thank you, Ji-heon’s lips stretched into a barely visible smile.

After that, he left the meeting room.

A little while later, Ki-hoon returned to the meeting room and noticed that Jeong-o was alone. He asked.

“Where’s the Director?”

“He left.”

“He asked for the meeting notes to be printed, though?”

“Yes.”

Ki-hoon sat back down with a disappointed expression.

Soon, the rest of the team gathered in the meeting room. Somehow, Jeong-o ended up sitting across from Eun-bi. When their eyes met, Eun-bi flashed a formal smile.

The meeting started with an overview from AE.

“The client has set the target audience and concept, so we were able to place the production request right away last week. Did you all review the additional product specs and competitor analysis materials? Today, I’d like us to share ideas, and once we agree, we’ll have the planning team work on the proposal.”

As is often the case, starting was the hardest part. None of the team members wanted to be the first to speak, so they all looked around nervously.

At that moment, the door opened, and Ji-heon re-entered the meeting room.

Although the room was spacious with plenty of empty seats, Ji-heon didn’t sit at the front. Instead, he chose a seat in the back, next to Jeong-o, directly in front of Eun-bi.

Jeong-o tensed, shrinking her shoulders, but Eun-bi smiled softly when she faced Ji-heon.

“Shall I go first?”

Eun-bi, feeling energized, raised her hand to speak first.

“People in their 20s and 30s are physically at their peak, but mentally they are very worn out.”

Ji-heon seemed oddly distracted. As he listened to Eun-bi’s presentation, he fidgeted, moving his legs and accidentally brushing his knee against Jeong-o’s. When Jeong-o moved her chair slightly, he bumped his pen.

His distracted behavior was almost magical. None of the other team members seemed to notice; only Jeong-o kept being bothered by it.

“There are many things I want to do, but I have to do what others tell me first. I get crushed at work, and even on my way home on the subway, I get pushed around. I see couples in the park, and they look so happy, I envy them…”

Thunk.

Finally, Ji-heon dropped the pen he had been holding.

Eun-bi’s gaze briefly lingered on Ji-heon.

The pen rolled under the table, close to Jeong-o’s seat.

The man who had been so fidgety grew quiet after dropping the pen. Jeong-o was stunned.

This guy… He dropped it on purpose, hoping I would pick it up.

“…So, this is the kind of youth that comes home exhausted and reaches for the beer in the fridge before food. After taking a sip, they think, ‘Ah, this is why I work.’ That’s the feeling we want to evoke.”

Resigned, Jeong-o leaned down and reached for the pen.

But at that moment, a large shadow loomed and covered her hand.

“Ah!”

It seemed like they both reached for the same thing, but the heat from the hand that covered hers startled Jeong-o, and she quickly pulled her hand back.

Ji-heon, with a neutral expression, looked at her and picked up the pen from the floor.

Jeong-o returned to her seat.

‘He probably didn’t do that on purpose.’

Eun-bi was sitting right there.

Thump-thump-thump-thump…

Her heart was racing. She was nervous, afraid someone might hear it.

It wasn’t excitement.

She didn’t want this to happen, but it felt like she had done something wrong.

Meanwhile, the man who had caused all this commotion sat shamelessly without a change in his expression.

Jeong-o also struggled to focus on the meeting again.

“I thought of two main copy ideas: ‘Solo needs beer’ and ‘This is the taste of youth.’ The key theme is healing. That’s all.”

Several members from Production Team 1 clapped at Eun-bi’s suggestion. Eun-bi smiled satisfactorily.

Miran was the first to give her feedback.

“Good, but it feels a bit cliché. The idea that youth is tough has been overdone in a lot of content already. Also, since Manager Choi’s direction is healing, it feels a little too tranquil.”

Eun-bi’s smile faded slightly at Miran’s comment. Yeong-hwa also added her opinion.

“Actually, there’s a visual problem. Most beer commercials feature young people in crowded, lively pubs, with models enjoying beer and shouting ‘Ah!’ Is it really a good idea to break this mold? Isn’t it risky?”

Next, Jeong-o raised her hand. It was her turn to speak.

“**I’ll never let you go**”

With one problem solved, Jiheon felt a little lighter.

It was Tuesday afternoon. After wrapping up an event, Jiheon was on his way to his office and casually glanced over at the production team.

The seats in Production Team 2 were all empty.

With a bit of free time, he decided to find the meeting room where the liquor ad production meeting was being held.

Voices could be heard from outside the door.

“Is it true that you never put your notebook down? Do you write everything down?”

“No, not everything. There’s just not much worth writing. I just keep thinking about it.”

“You’re the best copywriter I’ve ever met. I mean it, I really do.”

“You always say that whenever I do something.”

“You’re full of things to praise.”

It was the voices of Song Gihoon, a junior, and Lee Jeongoh.

When he opened the door and entered, he saw the two of them sitting next to each other at the far end of the room.

Gihoon stopped talking and greeted Jiheon energetically.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

Jeongoh simply nodded her head.

“When does the meeting start?”

“It’s in 10 minutes.”

“Gihoon, could you print out last week’s meeting minutes for me?”

“Sure.”

Gihoon stood up and left the room to print out the documents.

With only Jiheon and Jeongoh left in the meeting room, a tense silence fell.

While Jiheon had a lively conversation with Gihoon, Jeongoh remained silent, her lips tightly pressed together in front of him.

He thought about Yeona, was it? The image of her looking down reminded him of the smart girl from yesterday.

She had said she didn’t have a father.

For the first time, Jiheon thought long and hard about something he couldn’t quite empathize with.

He wanted to do something for her, but he didn’t know what that would be.

However, if there was even the slightest opportunity to use something, he thought he should make use of it.

He didn’t want to become Jeongoh’s father, but if that was the only connection they had, he figured it didn’t matter.

Jiheon spoke quietly.

“If you miss your dad, you can come see me.”

“What?”

“You said I looked like your father. If you’re okay with it, you can come and see me.”

“You mean, you?”

Jeongoh narrowed her eyes, asking again.

“Me? My face?”

Am I out of my mind?

Why would I want to see you?

“It’s just a suggestion. I was speaking with good intentions, you know.”

But Jiheon was serious. It seemed like the word “father” had caught her attention.

Either way, he thought it might be helpful to get a sense of her connections.

She gave a lukewarm thank-you.

A smile barely crept onto his lips before he left the meeting room.

Soon after, Gihoon came back to the room and noticed that Jeongoh was alone.

“Where’s the boss?”

“He left.”

“Didn’t he ask you to print the meeting minutes?”

“Yeah.”

Gihoon made a disappointed expression and returned to his seat.

Before long, the rest of the team gathered for the meeting. By chance, Jeongoh ended up sitting across from Eunbi. When their eyes met, Eunbi gave her a formal smile.

The meeting started with a general explanation from the AE.

“The client has already set the target and concept for the ad, so we requested production last week. Have you all reviewed the additional product specs and competitor analysis materials I sent? Today, we hope to share ideas, and once we agree on some, we’ll have the planning team finalize the proposal.”

As is often the case, the beginning of everything was hard. No one wanted to speak first, and everyone was watching each other carefully.

Then, the door opened, and Jiheon re-entered the room.

Despite the spacious room, with plenty of empty seats, Jiheon chose not to sit in the front but instead walked to the back, sitting right next to Jeongoh, which also happened to be in front of Eunbi.

Jeongoh looked tense, her shoulders slumped, while Eunbi smiled softly as she met Jiheon’s gaze.

“Shall I start?”

Feeling energized, Eunbi raised her hand first.

“People in their 20s and 30s, their bodies are strong, but mentally, they’re exhausted. They have so much to do, yet they feel drained.”

Jiheon seemed unusually distracted. While listening to Eunbi’s presentation, he fidgeted, moving his legs and accidentally nudging Jeongoh’s knee. When Jeongoh moved her chair slightly, his pen rattled on the table.

This distracted demeanor had a strange charm to it. No one seemed to notice except Jeongoh, who kept looking at him.

“People want to do a lot, but they’re forced to do what others tell them to. They get crushed at work, and on the subway ride home, they’re pushed and shoved. They see couples at the park and feel envious because they seem so perfect…”

Thud.

Finally, Jiheon dropped the pen he had been holding.

Eunbi briefly glanced toward Jiheon.

The pen had rolled to the floor, near Jeongoh’s seat.

The man who had been so distracted suddenly became eerily still after dropping the pen. Jeongoh, utterly frustrated, thought, *He did that on purpose. He wants me to pick it up.*

“…And so, after a long day, they come home and the first thing they reach for isn’t food, but a beer from the fridge. They take a sip and think, ‘Ah, this is why I work,’ feeling that sense of relief.”

Thud.

Giving up, Jeongoh reached down to pick up the pen.

At that moment, a large shadow loomed over her, covering her hand.

Gasp!

They had both reached for the pen at the same time, but Jeongoh was startled by the warmth of Jiheon’s hand as it covered hers.

Jiheon picked up the pen without a change in his expression and silently returned to his seat.

Jeongoh, too, returned to hers.

I hope that wasn’t on purpose.

Her heart was pounding.

She couldn’t quite decide whether this was excitement or just a strange feeling.

Jiheon, on the other hand, remained unaffected, casually sitting down, while Jeongoh struggled to focus again on the meeting.

“Here are two ideas I’ve been thinking about: ‘Solos need beer’ and ‘This taste is youth.’ The keyword is healing. That’s all.”

Some members of Production Team 1 clapped. Eunbi smiled with satisfaction.

Miran was the first to speak up.

“Sounds good, but I think it’s a bit too common. The idea that youth is struggling has been done in so many ads. Also, healing as a keyword seems a bit too calm for a beer ad.”

Eunbi’s smile wavered slightly at Miran’s critique. Yeonghwa added his thoughts.

“Visually, there’s an issue too. Most beer ads show crowded, noisy pubs with people drinking and models loudly enjoying their drinks. Should we really break that mold? Isn’t that a risky move?”

Next, Jeongoh raised her hand. It was her turn.

Phew.

“What’s going on? You can tell me. Just between us.”

“Haa…”

“It’s okay. Go ahead, tell me.”

Eunbi reluctantly started speaking.

“…But you have to keep it a secret. This is confidential, understand?”

“Of course! I won’t tell anyone.”

Assistant Manager Jo eagerly agreed to be involved.

Eunbi lowered her voice.

“It’s about Assistant Manager Lee Jeongoh from Team 2.”

“The new copywriter? Why? What happened?”

“She’s actually my high school classmate.”

“Oh, really? But you two use formal language with each other.”

“She told me not to acknowledge her at work. I guess it makes her uncomfortable. But I don’t feel good about it either.”

“Aha, that’s what the vibe was! I noticed Jeongoh was surprisingly tough, especially with you. I could feel it too.”

“Exactly. It’s hard for others not to notice.”

“…”

“Actually, I know Jeongoh’s mom.”

“Really? Are you close with her family?”

“No, not really. But her mom used to work at our high school cafeteria. There was some incident back then, and she quit after that.”

“What happened?”

“I think she was caught stealing food from the school.”

“Oh my gosh!”

Jo made a loud exclamation, and Eunbi couldn’t help but smile inside.

“She comes from a pretty tough background. That’s why I tried to help her out. But as we got closer…”

“What happened?”

“You know the type, right? The kind of people who always want what others have and try to imitate them?”

“Yeah, I know! I had a classmate in my prep school who was always copying me, and it drove me crazy. I heard recently that she got fired for an affair at work.”

Eunbi knew exactly what Jo was talking about. She had heard this story before, as Jo often brought it up. Jo seemed to talk so much that she didn’t even remember saying it every time.

“People’s true nature shows early on, you know? She had it in her from the start.”

“That story makes me uneasy. Actually, Jeongoh visits our Jiheon oppa quite often.”

“Why does she go see him?”

“Who knows? She probably has a lot of things to talk about. But it feels a bit awkward.”

Eunbi let out another deep sigh, and Jo placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, though. Jiheon oppa is different.”

Of course, Jo didn’t really know what Jiheon was like. All she knew was what Eunbi had told her.

“Our manager is the only one he seems to treat differently, right? He’s always cold to the other women. Isn’t that right? Did you hear what he said today? ‘I’ll keep her close. I’ll never let her go.’ I almost shouted. I’ve never seen him act like that before.”

When Jo brought up what happened in the meeting, Eunbi felt a little uncomfortable.

At that moment, Jiheon wasn’t looking at her. He was looking at Jeongoh.

But she couldn’t tell Jo that.

“…Well, yes. Jiheon oppa is different, but…”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be keeping an eye on things, Manager. If I see anything suspicious, that assistant manager will be finished in this industry.”

Jo clenched her fist, fired up with determination.

“Jiheon is totally yours, Manager Cha Eunbi.”

Thanks to Jo’s words, Eunbi felt her spirits lift again, and she managed a smile.

Now, there was one more person keeping an eye on Jeongoh.

The two women finished their conversation and left the bathroom to return to their seats.

A little while later, Jo ran over to Eunbi and whispered in her ear.

“Manager, I think Manager Seong Miran was in the bathroom earlier. What should we do?”

Eunbi saw Miran coming out of the bathroom and heading back to her seat.

“Assistant Manager Jeongoh is going to be in trouble. Manager Seong’s husband had an affair with a colleague, and they got divorced.”

“Yeah, what should we do…”

Eunbi trailed off, her voice tinged with concern, though it didn’t reflect her true feelings.

She was well aware of Seong Miran’s past through rumors.

It felt like she had killed two birds with one stone.

Of course, that stone could end up killing the frog too.

Ch 20 - One Week Left

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13 years ago.

It was the day of the midterm exams at **○○ High School**.

The second period was Classical Chinese, a subject where students with good memorization skills could finish all the questions in 10 minutes.

Eunbi was sitting in the third seat of the last row, where it was easy to get away with distractions without being noticed by the teacher.

It was also a good spot for using a cheat sheet.

She would cut an A4 paper in half, fill both sides with small writing, and tuck it into her sleeve. It worked like a charm. Eunbi had solved memorization-heavy subjects this way every time. By now, she had become so skilled that she could pull it out the moment the teacher turned their back.

After finishing the exam without incident, the break time arrived, and the students began to bustle around. Someone knocked into Eunbi's desk, making it shift out of alignment. Annoyed, Eunbi straightened the desk. During that brief moment, the cheat sheet fell to the floor.

Thud.

The first person to notice it was Lee Jeongoh, who was sitting diagonally in the row next to hers.

"Eunbi, this fell."

Eunbi felt like her heart had dropped instead of the cheat sheet.

The paper, which looked unmistakably like a cheat sheet, was casually handed back to Eunbi by Jeongoh.

“Thanks.”

She quickly grabbed the paper, muttering a short thank-you.

Did Jeongoh see it? *What if she tells the teacher? What if I get a zero?*

Eunbi had used cheat sheets in previous exams as well. What if it got caught this time?

Even if she got rid of all the evidence, if she had to retake the exam, she didn’t think she could score the same again. She felt the blood drain from her face.

In the end, Eunbi was so worried about the cheat sheet that she messed up the next exam as well.

It would be a disaster if her family found out about her exam results. Eunbi was the youngest daughter in a family of legal professionals. Her mother was a law school professor, her father was a judge, and her older brother was an S University law student preparing for law school.

Her parents thought studying was the easiest thing in the world. They expected good grades as a given and couldn’t understand why anyone would struggle. Eunbi had lived her life feeling suffocated in that environment.

If any cheating was discovered in other exams…

For days after the midterms, Eunbi felt as if she were walking on thin ice. Every time Jeongoh got up from her seat, Eunbi felt a pang of fear, as if Jeongoh might suddenly run to the teacher and expose everything.

Growing increasingly anxious, Eunbi decided to try to get on Jeongoh’s good side.

“Jeongoh, do you want this? I’ve never used it.”

Eunbi offered a lip gloss from her favorite luxury brand, a tactic she often used with her friends. They would always accept her gifts, and those who received them would become useful tools for her.

But Jeongoh was different from Eunbi’s other friends.

“No, it’s okay.”

“You might want to have one.”

“No. I don’t wear makeup, really. I’m fine.”

Inside, Eunbi was more nervous than ever. *Is she thinking this is a bribe? Is that why she’s not accepting it?*

“You’re pretty enough, Jeongoh. You’d look even better with makeup. And this is a luxury brand.”

“I really don’t need it, Eunbi.”

Jeongoh refused firmly. Eunbi couldn’t help but feel as though Jeongoh was looking down on her.

“Thanks for thinking of me. I’m sorry.”

With that, Jeongoh coldly walked away.

Afterward, Eunbi became even more afraid of Jeongoh. She needed to act fast to make sure no one would believe Jeongoh. She had to act before Jeongoh became a ticking time bomb.

—

The morning of Thursday, a week before the weekend, was filled with the excitement that only employees feel as they approach the end of the workweek.

Yeona poked her head out from under the neckline of her T-shirt and cheerfully said,

“Mom, there’s only one week left!”

“Left for what?”

“Don’t you know what next Thursday is?”

Her daughter had already mentioned it a hundred times, so there was no way she didn’t know.

Children live for the joy of anticipation. They wait for Christmas, Children’s Day, their birthdays.

It’s that sense of waiting that raises them. Jeongoh realized that his daughter had grown so much since this time last year.

She was already seven years old.

Yeona was born before completing the full 40 weeks of pregnancy. She arrived at 37 weeks, weighing only 2.7 kg, and her mother was constantly worried.

Even after Jeongoh was discharged, Yeona could not go home because of cyanosis, and Jeongoh didn’t get any postpartum recovery time, going to visit her daughter every day. Even after Yeona was discharged a week later, Jeongoh continued to worry.

There was something else unusual about the baby. On Yeona’s forehead, right in the middle, there was a dark spot that resembled a sweet potato’s

red skin.

Although Jeongoh didn’t know much about babies, she had never seen anything like it before. When she asked the nurse, the nurse explained that it was a “salmon patch.” It was common in many newborns and would disappear by the time the baby was a year old.

However, Yeona’s salmon patch remained even when she turned seven years old.

As Yeona’s face became fairer, the salmon patch became more reddish. Jeongoh considered treating it, but the process was complicated, and she had heard many times that it usually disappeared around adolescence. She chose to cover it with bangs and decided to watch over it.

Somewhere, it is said that salmon patches are called “angel’s kiss.” The idea is that the baby is so beautiful that an angel kissed that spot.

Jeongoh believed that. Yeona must have been an angel in her past life. That's why she must have made this world into heaven.

Jeongoh thought that when Yeona's salmon patch eventually disappeared, she would feel a bit sad. She wished that Yeona would grow up a little more slowly.

"What do you want to do for your birthday?"

"I want to eat cake with Mom and Grandma."

Yeona shared her simple wish.

Jeongoh thought to herself, *Mr. Jeong Jiheon…*

Our daughter’s seventh birthday is coming up.

—

A few days ago, Jeongoh had been sensing something strange.

Mi-ran seemed to be keeping her distance from her, though she didn’t make it obvious. The friendliness she had felt when she first joined seemed to have faded slightly, but Mi-ran was still a fair person to everyone.

What bothered Jeongoh more was the Production Team 1.

She felt like Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae from Production Team 1 was treating her coldly. Over time, it started to feel like she was being outright ignored. At first, it was just Jo Si-nae, but today it seemed like Assistant Manager Jo Yu-ri had joined in as well.

What was especially bitter was that they were careful not to make it obvious in front of others. The most dangerous moments were when they were away from the team or when Jeongoh was left alone in the meeting room. They would criticize her ideas after the fact or make strange requests, which was exhausting.

Today, Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae approached Jeongoh while the Production Team 2 was away.

“Assistant Manager Lee Jeongoh, I heard there’s a company dinner with Dawon Liquor tonight?”

“No? I didn’t hear about it.”

“You should try to find out more. It’s not good to be the only one who doesn’t know what everyone else does.”

“Now that I know, it’s fine.”

Si-nae’s tone, which resembled Eunbi’s, made Jeongoh respond coldly.

Si-nae, who had been sniffing her nose in response to Jeongoh’s reply, said,

“The client wants to have a dinner with the production team, so it was rushed. But the AE in charge is on a business trip, so unfortunately, they’re not here.”

“…”

“We’re all busy with our own tasks, so it would be great if you could find a venue for us. Could you please take care of it?”

So, today’s strange request was about arranging the company dinner.

Jeongoh didn’t think it would be too hard to find a venue, so she nodded readily.

“Okay. I’ll take care of it.”

However,

“You’ll need to go there in person.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you just call, you might not get all the details. You need to go, check the location and menu, and then let us know. Also, bring the clients along.”

Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae wanted Jeongoh to take care of the client as well.

At this point, she could be called a “little Eunbi,” couldn’t she?

“Well, I’d prefer if the AE contacts us in the middle of it. The AE would handle it better, but it’s a bit uncomfortable asking you to do this, Assistant Manager.”

“If it’s uncomfortable, you could come with me.”

“That won’t work. I’m too busy. Anyway, I trust you. Assistant Manager.”

Si-nae smiled sweetly.

—

The production team received an urgent call from the client, Dawon Liquor, saying they wanted to meet with the production team. Since the AE and planning team leader were on a business trip, Jiheon found himself in a slightly awkward situation.

The clients who were coming were from the department head level, so it wasn’t necessary for Jiheon to personally entertain them.

But, of course, he was more interested in the potential benefits from the dinner than anything else.

Since they wanted to meet with the production team, Jeongoh would also show up.

Jiheon was curious about how she would act at the dinner.

He headed toward the production team. Production Team 1 was mostly present, but there was no one from Production Team 2.

“There’s no one from Production Team 2.”

Jiheon spoke to Jo Yu-ri, who was sitting at the farthest desk.

Yu-ri hesitated before answering.

“Uh? Well… Assistant Manager Ko and Employee Song went to do print shooting, and Assistant Manager Lee went to find the dinner location for Dawon Liquor.”

Jiheon raised his eyebrows.

“Already left?”

“Y-Yes. The client is coming early.”

Before Yu-ri could finish her answer, Jiheon turned and left the room.

He immediately called Mi-ran.

“Team Leader, this is Jiheon. Could you send me the contact information for Assistant Manager Lee Jeongoh?”

The excuse was good enough. Since the client was coming to the office, Jiheon had no choice but to contact Jeongoh.

Mi-ran quickly sent Jeongoh’s contact information.

It was raining outside the window.

Ha, a company dinner on a rainy day.

Jeongoh let out a lonely sigh as she came down to the first floor. Through the glass door outside, she could see the heavy downpour.

It seemed like a passing rainstorm, but she would still need an umbrella. She had to meet the client.

She turned and went into the convenience store inside the building.

But there were no umbrellas left, despite them being fully stocked on clear days.

“Did all the umbrellas sell out?”

“Yes. The rain came suddenly, so they’re all gone.”

What was she supposed to do? If it was just a team dinner, she wouldn’t mind getting soaked, but since it was with the client, she needed to look presentable.

Ha, her first company dinner was with the client. How exciting.

She stood in front of the door, waiting for the rain to ease, when her phone vibrated in her pocket.

It was an unknown number.

“This is Jeongoh Lee.”

When she heard her name on the other end, her heart skipped a beat.

It reminded her of that day seven years ago when Jiheon called her and told her never to contact him again. At the time, Jeongoh didn’t even doubt that the voice on the other side was Jiheon’s, even though she wasn’t sure.

But now, she was certain that it was Jiheon.

“Yes, Mr. Jiheon.”

[You recognized my voice. Where are you right now?]

“I’m on the first floor of the building.”

The call abruptly ended.

Her mind went blank as she drifted into memories that had no nostalgia attached to them.

Jiheon took an umbrella and got in the elevator. He had a feeling that she wouldn’t have one.

As the elevator descended, he bumped into Seung-gyu.

Seung-gyu beamed when he saw Jiheon.

“Oh, you have an umbrella! Let’s share it.”

Seung-gyu was unusually friendly today. In just a few days, the cloud over him had completely disappeared, and he had returned to being Jiheon’s precious friend.

But today, the seat next to me… is not for you.

“You’re going to the dinner? The client is coming, right?”

Seung-gyu seemed to know all about Jiheon’s situation, and Jiheon smiled faintly at his friend.

When they got off the elevator, Jeongoh was standing outside the front door of the building.

Jiheon handed Seung-gyu the umbrella.

“You use it,” Jiheon said.

“Huh? Then what about you?” Jeongoh asked.

“I’ll run,” Jiheon replied.

“What are you talking about? We can share it,” Jeongoh insisted.

“Just use it,” Jiheon said firmly.

“…”

“Come out in three minutes.”

“…”

“I’ll go ahead.”

Jiheon widened his stride and walked ahead.

Seung-gyu looked between Jiheon and the umbrella, unsure of what to do.

Jeongoh stood there, waiting for the rain to ease.

Then, a shadow appeared from behind, casting over her shoulder.

“Do you have an umbrella?”

It was Jiheon.

Why did he have to stand so close and talk over her shoulder? Couldn’t he just talk from a little further away? What if she accidentally bumped heads while turning around?

She still worried about his safety, even though it had been seven years since he got hurt.

“No, I don’t have one, Mr. Jiheon.”

At her response, Jiheon easily shrugged off his suit jacket and held it over her head.

“Let’s go together.”

…What? He wanted to walk with her holding his suit jacket?

It was a proposal that made her feel more uneasy than excited.

“No, it’s fine. I’m going to buy an umbrella over there.”

Jeongoh shook her head and pointed toward the convenience store across the street.

“Then just until there,” Jiheon said, not backing down.

Without hesitation, he gave a gentle push on her back. She was suddenly running into the relentless rain, unprepared for it.

All the preparations were on Jiheon’s part. His arm, stretched out behind her, held the jacket firmly over her head. His suit jacket, worth dozens of umbrellas, shielded her from the rain.

With every movement, her round shoulders brushed against his broad chest.

The cold, damp air from the rain was replaced by his warmth, as if his body heat enveloped hers.

The sound of the rain mingled with the beating of her heart.

From a distance, Seung-gyu stood, watching the scene with a blank expression.

“That guy…” he muttered.

Even when he had been speaking harshly to his friend a few days ago, he hadn’t let out a single curse. But now, the words slipped out unexpectedly.

However, a smile remained on his face.

He was looking forward to teasing his friend starting tomorrow.

Ch 21 - I Can Do Anything

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Eun-bi was very pleased.

After complaining about Jeong-o to Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae, things became easier. She had someone who could torment Jeong-o in her place—a leader of action.

Today, Si-nae had already given Jeong-o an excellent directive without even being asked. She requested that he take care of the advertiser's hospitality.

The AE who was on a business trip said they would hurry back, but it would likely be after 7 PM, and everyone in the production team was busy with their own tasks.

Everyone would be leaving the company en masse after 8 PM. So, Jeong-o would have to handle the advertiser alone for over an hour.

Eun-bi felt a thrill at the thought of watching Jeong-o sweat.

Unable to sit still, Eun-bi leisurely wandered around the office. During her stroll, she ran into Ji-heon's secretary, Yoon Ae-ra.

Eun-bi greeted her warmly.

"Ae-ra, are you off work?"

"Yes, Manager."

"Has the Director left too?"

“I heard the Director went to meet with the production team and the advertiser. Didn’t you go with him?”

Her carefully crafted smile quickly faded.

Eun-bi dashed to the team and immediately called for Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae.

“Jo Si-nae.”

“Yes, Manager.”

Si-nae stood up with a puzzled look at Eun-bi’s angry expression.

“You sent Jeong-o to prepare for the dinner all by himself?”

“Ah… Yes. The other team members are all busy.”

“But how can you send him alone? How can a copywriter handle the advertiser on his own!”

***

Ji-heon had never adjusted his pace to match someone else’s. The women who stood beside him had always had to jog to keep up with his long strides.

But for the first time, Ji-heon matched his pace to that of a woman.

He didn’t even notice that his shoulder was getting wet while he was focusing on keeping her body dry.

He wished the short walk to the convenience store across the street would take an eternity, but soon they arrived at the other side.

In front of the convenience store, Jeong-o asked, “Thank you. Should I buy an umbrella for the Director too?”

“No, that’s fine.”

Because I’m going to share it with you.

Ji-heon concealed his true feelings as he answered.

Without insisting a second time, Jeong-o entered the store alone and soon emerged holding two umbrellas.

“Here you go. Use this, Director.”

Ji-heon looked down at the umbrellas with displeasure.

Not only was he unhappy that Jeong-o had bought two, but the umbrellas were yellow—something a child might use.

“Can’t I get a refund? I have tons of umbrellas at home.”

Jeong-o subtly frowned.

A rich person, acting stingy over a single umbrella.

“Then just use it today, and you can give it back to me later. I don’t have any umbrellas at my house.”

Jeong-o stated this matter-of-factly and moved ahead. There was no time to bicker. She had to find a place quickly and contact the advertiser to take them to the dinner location.

Before leaving the company, she decided to check the seats in the order they were confirmed. The pub Gi-hun recommended seemed quite decent.

“No need to look around; this will do.”

“Yes. If anyone complains that the place is wrong, I’ll say it was your choice, Director.”

At Jeong-o’s jest, Ji-heon chuckled lightly.

As soon as they settled at the pub, Jeong-o’s phone rang. The advertiser’s contact appeared on the screen.

“Yes, Assistant Manager. Where are you right now?”

Jeong-o cautiously answered the call. After firmly grasping the advertiser’s current location, Jeong-o quickly hung up and stood up.

Ji-heon also got up.

Jeong-o stared at Ji-heon and said, “How about you join us later, Director?”

“Why?”

“Think about it. You’re a director, and I’m just a manager. Wouldn’t it be a burden for you to come out personally to host? Can you comfortably drink?”

“Still, it’s better than handling it alone.”

“Haha. It’s all right.”

Jeong-o chuckled lightly.

Hmph. What does she take me for?

I’m a Strong Woman on This Land

I’m not afraid of anything.

Advertisers, come to me!

Every fiber in my body for hosting a dinner buzzed with excitement, ready to go.

Due to Jeong-o’s insistence, Ji-heon had to leave the dinner location.

Considering returning to the office, Ji-heon settled into a café right next to the dinner venue.

Unable to shake off his worries, he decided to stay in the café for just 30 minutes before heading out again.

As the time dragged on, what felt like a whole day passed in those 30 minutes.

Before he knew it, the rain had stopped.

With a determined mind, Ji-heon stood up.

As he headed towards the dinner venue, the AE in charge of the Daewon liquor brand ran over, panting and greeting him.

“Phew! Are you here too, Director?”

“I heard that a copywriter is handling two advertisers by himself.”

“Yes, it seems like other production team members will be arriving soon too.”

***

Ji-heon and the AE walked with anxious hearts.

As they opened the pub door, faint laughter from Jeong-o could be heard.

In the spacious area, Jeong-o was seated across from the two advertisers, having a fun and lively conversation.

“Do you know why you shouldn’t slam the car door?”

“Correct! Because there are four car doors!”

With the advertisers’ silly question, Jeong-o enthusiastically exclaimed. The advertisers laughed, clapping their hands.

“Assistant Manager, when is the last train?”

“Oh, Assistant Choi said he lives in Bundang. I’ll check the last train time.”

“Next question. In which area does the wind blow cutely?”

“Correct, Bundang! The wind blows in Bundang~”

Throwing light questions at the advertisers and responding swiftly to their trivial inquiries, Jeong-o surprisingly managed the time well.

As Ji-heon and the AE got closer, Jeong-o beamed and introduced Ji-heon to the advertisers.

“Our AE has arrived. And this is our headquarters’ Director, Jeong Ji-heon.”

“Hello, I’m Jeong Ji-heon.”

“Ah, it’s nice to meet you for the first time, Director…”

At Ji-heon’s greeting, a female manager blushed as she responded.

“Soon, the production team members will all be here. I hope they can assist you two.”

“Assistant Jeong-o has already shared a lot about the project direction and provided many creative tips, Director.”

Jeong-o’s face lit up.

Her round forehead was glistening. Although she was smiling brightly on the outside, it seemed she had been sweating quite a bit. Ji-heon regretted not arriving sooner, thinking about how hard she must have struggled against the liquor company employees.

After a while, the production team members joined them, arriving 30 minutes earlier than scheduled. Eun-bi’s face was flushed, seemingly displeased about something.

As more people arrived, Jeong-o could subtly slip away.

Moments later, after smoothing her chest with her hand, Jeong-o stood up from her seat. Ji-heon, who had been watching her, quietly followed suit.

Jeong-o headed straight to the convenience store outside.

As she picked up a hangover drink to pay, a hand suddenly appeared from behind.

It was Ji-heon.

“I’ll pay for it.”

“Oh, then this one.”

Jeong-o picked the most expensive drink. Ji-heon paid for both.

“Thank you.”

Jeong-o bowed to Ji-heon and gulped down the drink.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, of course.”

She looked quite fine on the outside, so Ji-heon felt relieved and asked her.

“How did the advertisers respond? Which idea did they like the most?”

He opened the conversation with work-related talk because he wanted to keep her around a little longer.

However, she couldn’t answer immediately.

Her cheeks puffed up and then deflated repeatedly, as if she were about to regurgitate everything she had drunk. It was a cute expression, but it looked precarious.

“Did you drink a lot?”

“They said they needed opinions on the taste of the alcohol, so I drank whatever they offered.”

Jeong-o replied with a look of enlightenment.

“You drank whatever they offered? Even soju and beer?”

“I thought you’d come in 30 minutes, and the AE would be here soon too, so I just had to hold on for 30 more minutes.”

“You really lack flexibility.”

At her response, Ji-heon became a bit angry. It seemed she had overdone it. He wished she had taken better care of herself.

“Isn’t it something you should know yourself? That you can’t go beyond this point?”

“The advertisers liked all the ideas. But it didn’t seem like any particular one caught their attention.”

As he reprimanded her, unexpectedly, Jeong-o gave an answer to his previous question.

“Maybe the concept might change a bit, Director.”

Not wanting to appear drunk, her voice was overly clear, which smoothed Ji-heon’s furrowed brow.

“Feelings change. They have to keep changing. You have to keep making choices depending on the situations you face.”

“……”

“There was a couple who loved each other.”

Suddenly, the conversation took a turn into a story reminiscent of the beginning of a romance novel.

Seemingly hesitant to use definitive expressions, she quickly changed her wording.

"……They thought they loved each other, but maybe they didn't. As soon as the man learned about the woman's pregnancy, he left. So the woman raised the child alone."

What could be the meaning behind bringing up such a topic? Was she just drunk?

Ji-heon quietly sighed and crossed his arms.

Yeah, let's see where this goes, he thought.

"But then the man appeared before the woman a few years later."

He didn't want to get swept up in such trivial stories, but her serious tone and gaze made it impossible for him to remain silent.

"Why did he only show up now? To take the child away? The child who had become the woman's everything?"

He pondered her question, which had a touch of curiosity.

Ji-heon opened his mouth to say something, but she spoke first.

"If that's the case, then she should stop him, right?"

"……"

"To protect her child, the woman would do anything. Wouldn't she?"

"……"

"She can do anything. There are no limits."

A clear glassy film covered her eyes thickly.

Her gaze, filled with determination, was so intense that it felt like it could melt the glassy film covering her eyes.

His heart throbbed as if it had been burned.

He hadn’t even had that many drinks, yet his head throbbed painfully, like someone was prodding him with a needle.

Amidst all this, he couldn’t suppress the desire to have her.

What was it about this woman that made him yearn for her so deeply?

She was a woman who was hard to define in just a few words.

She would casually throw out her thoughts and then turn away.

Ji-heon felt an unjust sense of frustration at being swept away alone. He wanted her to look back.

How can I make you look back?

How can I keep you close?

If he could just make her look back, he felt he could do anything, whatever it took.

“Jeong-o.”

Ji-heon called her name softly and affectionately, imagining her father.

She paused.

Her reaction was swift.

She stopped walking and slowly turned her head.

The tears that had once been a clear film were already melted and fallen to the ground.

He had only called her name, yet it seemed she forgot to breathe.

Her lips, slightly parted, trembled helplessly.

Ji-heon was also surprised.

Had she found a vision of her father summoned by the alcohol?

Or did she really mistake him for her dad? Did she want to be mistaken?

Her gaze was filled with a longing to believe, even while doubting something.

The joy of having moved her, combined with the thrill of seeing a side of her he had never witnessed before, made his heart pound painfully in his chest.

Just a little more.

Driven by the desire to delve deeper into her heart, he impulsively asked her,

“Can you see me?”

“……”

“Do you recognize me?”

At his question, she let out a breath that resembled a sigh.

With each step, the distance between them shrank. She took a step closer, struggling to part her lips.

“……Oppa….”

The words that tumbled out, filled with emotion, were unclear.

To him, who didn’t know the full story, it sounded like “Dad.”

He should feel proud that she had reacted, but a heavy stone seemed to settle in a corner of his heart.

***

To her, ‘Dad’ is a figure of tears.

Suddenly, he thought he had touched something that should not be disturbed.

He quickly reached out to recover the situation, but—

Her hands, slowly rising, brushed against his cheek first. Ji-heon’s eyes widened.

Just like a week ago in the lounge, when she had sat in front of him, shedding thick tears, her gaze was swirling, as if it would pull him in, contorting her face.

“……You came back?”

She asked, her voice muffled by tears.

Was she asking if his memories had returned? If he could now recognize her?

Even though he could never understand her poignant circumstances.

Once again, he was helplessly being drawn in.

Ch22 - Out of Control

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Upon hearing that Lee Jeong-o and Jeong Ji-heon had left to entertain the clients, Eun-bi hurriedly wrapped up her work and headed to the gathering place.

At the spacious table in the pub, five people were present: two clients, the responsible AE, Jeong Ji-heon, and Lee Jeong-o.

Eun-bi frowned when she recognized Jeong-o's voice.

"What's with that jingle? Why is he making such a racket?"

She was displeased with Jeong-o, who was incessantly cracking jokes for the clients. Not to mention Ji-heon, who was quietly smiling while observing.

"Sorry we're late. Work suddenly piled up on us."

Eun-bi interjected and took a seat between Jeong-o and Ji-heon, greeting the clients.

As the empty seats gradually filled up, Jeong-o silently distanced himself from the center and took a seat at the edge. Only then did Eun-bi feel relieved.

The client, whom she had briefly encountered at the company, was quite talkative. Moreover, she couldn't believe how many dull jokes he was throwing around. After a few forced laughs, Eun-bi could no longer bear it and slipped away to the restroom.

“I need to get out of here.”

Ji-heon, who disliked dullness, must have been feeling frustrated after staying there for so long.

“Should I call Oppa?”

She recalled that her older brother, Chae Eun-yeob, mentioned he would be nearby today.

Eun-yeob and Ji-heon were long-time friends. If she casually suggested going out, Ji-heon might refuse, but using Eun-yeob as an excuse would likely work.

Eun-bi was glad that Ji-heon was a friend of her brother. This connection was not something that could be easily severed.

Eun-bi sent a text to Eun-yeob, asking him to meet with Ji-heon nearby.

Eun-yeob quickly picked up on her intention and replied that he would contact Ji-heon.

With a satisfied expression, Eun-bi emerged from the restroom.

However, Ji-heon’s seat was empty.

“Where did the Director go?” she asked the employee sitting next to her.

“He went outside a little while ago.”

A chill ran down her spine. The voice that had been so grating just moments ago was now absent. Eun-bi quickly turned her head.

Jeong-o’s seat was also empty.

Jeong Ji-heon and Lee Jeong-o had both disappeared.

***

In front of the convenience store.

As she approached, her hands touching him felt like they were massaging his heart rather than his cheeks.

Her fingertips, brushing against his cheeks, were warm.

Lee Jeong-o was quite drunk.

Although it had started as a joke on his part, Ji-heon no longer found it amusing.

His chest felt tight.

It was pitiful to see her with such longing eyes, as if she truly believed he was her father’s spirit.

He wanted to empathize with her plight, but his body rejected it. He didn’t want to be swept away by her feelings for her father or that noble sentiment.

Even in this moment he wanted to resist, her coming closer and revealing her feelings through her tears made her look so stunning that it infuriated him.

The urge to pull her in for a hug and kiss her was pushing his reason aside.

He wanted to shatter the existence of her father… to take his place.

Ji-heon needed to quickly end the game.

“Lee Jeong-o. Get a grip.”

It was ridiculous to be the one who started the joke and then suddenly become serious.

“Your father has passed away.”

“……”

“If you lead her on like this, she’ll fall for just anyone, won’t she?”

At his remark, the color drained from her face.

Her hand slowly fell away. She looked so shocked that she seemed to forget what to say.

Her eyes trembled painfully, like a leaf clinging to a branch in the wind.

“……What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong? You’re Lee Jeong-o’s superior, aren’t you?”

Ji-heon felt he had to be a bit bolder.

“He’s not your father; he’s just a man. A living person. Jeong Ji-heon.”

“……Did you just joke with me?”

“Isn’t it even more ridiculous to believe that?”

He had managed to instill feelings of shock and disgust in the woman he had liked for the first time in his life.

Still, his heart raced uncontrollably, like a car with broken brakes.

The twisted desire to erase the word “father” from her mind would not subside.

He clenched his fists tightly and then abruptly turned around.

“I sympathize with your situation, but be careful. It’s a world where soft-hearted people like Lee Jeong-o get taken advantage of.”

That should do it. This was enough.

He had awakened her to how cruel the real world could be.

He was thankful for the convenient excuse of “advice.”

“Let’s go. I’ll take you home.”

He slowly moved his feet, but there were no sounds of footsteps following him.

After just two steps, he turned around to see her figure striding away in the opposite direction.

“Lee Jeong….”

Before he could even finish calling her name, she had already hailed a taxi and left.

***

Eun-bi hurried out of the pub and called Ji-heon. He didn’t pick up.

Just in case, she found Jeong-o’s phone number and called him as well.

All she got was a message saying that neither of them was available.

Eun-bi felt anxious.

“Chae Eun-bi.”

Eun-yeob approached from a distance, calling out his sister’s name.

As promised, her older brother had arrived.

“Did you come out alone? Ji-heon isn’t answering his phone.”

Eun-yeob, unaware of the situation, asked Eun-bi.

“Uh… Ji-heon oppa is missing.”

“What? You called me without checking properly?”

“No, I came out of the restroom, and he was gone.”

“He just vanished without saying a word to you?”

Eun-yeob pressed, crumpling his face in annoyance. Eun-bi couldn’t say anything in response.

As he took out a cigarette, Eun-yeob exhaled a rough sigh in Eun-bi’s direction.

“Chae Eun-bi. Can’t you do just one thing?”

“……”

“It’s been years, and you still haven’t secured Jeong Ji-heon’s heart? I set everything up for you.”

Eun-bi’s fixation on Ji-heon was largely influenced by Eun-yeob. He wanted Eun-bi and Ji-heon to be together and spared no effort in supporting them.

Seven years ago, it was Eun-yeob who suggested Eun-bi transfer to a university in the U.S., and he had bought the officetel where Ji-heon lived.

Eun-yeob invested more into Eun-bi’s relationship with Ji-heon than she did concerning Ji-heon’s parents.

He was someone with clear ideals and objectives.

“Father will be preparing for the general elections next year. You need to get married before that. That way, he’ll feel more at ease.”

“……”

“You should contribute to him in some way, even if it’s just that. Right?”

With the implication that she wasn’t good at anything, Eun-yeob’s words tightened the grip around Eun-bi’s heart.

The only thing she could do, having struggled academically and not contributing to the family in any way, was to marry.

Thus, Eun-bi found herself even more obsessed.

She would marry him. She absolutely had to marry Jeong Ji-heon.

Eun-bi clenched her fist tightly.

“That’s the only thing we’re counting on from you. Let’s do well, Chae Eun-bi. Okay?”

After the harsh words came a note of encouragement, and Eun-bi nodded, holding back tears.

***

“What a jerk.”

Returning home without even packing her bag, Jeong-o lay down next to the asleep Yena, suppressing his anger.

Who was lecturing him? They didn’t even know.

What a jerk, what a jerk.

He almost got tricked by him, and if he hadn’t laughed it off so quickly, he might have ended up spilling everything, even the story about Yena.

Still, how could he imitate a father when he said his dad had passed away?

How could he make a joke out of that? What kind of person does that?

Disappointment kept piling up.

Could I really show my daughter to a man like this? Isn’t it better to pretend that she doesn’t have a father, just like now?

Jeong-o counted silently in his head, like counting sheep, and repeated “bad guy” about a thousand times before falling asleep.

***

The next morning.

Jeong-o dragged his heavy body into the kitchen.

After running around in the rain and drinking various kinds of alcohol the previous day, it felt like he was hit by both a hangover and a cold.

“Did you drink a lot? Sit down quickly.”

Guk-soon said.

The smell of clear abalone soup wafted toward him, but Jeong-o didn’t have the strength to lift a spoon. Guk-soon took a spoonful of the soup and fed it to the wobbling Jeong-o like he was a baby.

To Guk-soon, Jeong-o was a thirty-year-old baby.

After accepting a spoonful like a fledgling bird, Jeong-o finally lifted the spoon himself.

“How much did you drink?”

“Just enough.”

“You must have drunk quite a bit then.”

“Mom, be quiet. Yena will hear you.”

“Are you ashamed in front of your daughter? Oh dear.”

Guk-soon raised one side of her lips in a teasing manner.

“Eat more! How else are you going to recover?”

“No, it’s not a hangover; it’s a cold.”

“What kind of cold in June?”

“It rained yesterday. I got caught a little.”

“Ugh! Serves you right!”

“…….”

“You loved getting pampered so much, and now you come back with a cold? Ugh!”

He didn’t even have the energy to retort against his mother’s nagging.

Seeing his lethargic state, Guk-soon’s voice quickly softened.

“Take a day off work and just lie down for a bit.”

“How long has it been since you started a new job that you want to take sick leave?”

“Then should I just quit my job?”

“It’s almost the weekend anyway.”

“Ugh!”

Guk-soon sighed heavily, as if she were about to burst with frustration, and stood up from her seat.

***

Jeong-o lowered his head like a sinner and continued to eat the abalone soup.

Thanks to the soup filled with his mother’s love, his queasy stomach calmed down significantly.

As his stomach settled, memories of the previous night flooded back.

Jeong Ji-heon had tricked him. That bad guy.

As the memories resurfaced, anger surged up alongside them.

A moment later, he found himself hiccuping.

“There was a couple who loved each other.”

Oh my god… What a mistake I made.

He had lost his temper and ended up saying such nonsense after Ji-heon had scolded him about some limits.

He wanted to tell the mother of the child that there were no limits for her! He had spilled out his story in the third person!

I must be crazy!

As morning arrived, and the light pouring in washed away the darkness, the past remained untouched, unable to be cleansed.

Having to carry this past into work today was terrifying.

Jeong-o roared internally.

Ah! I don’t want to go to work!

***

Ji-heon, who arrived early, quickly scanned the office. Confirming that Jeong-o hadn’t come in yet, he headed straight down to the first floor.

After waiting for a while, he finally saw Jeong-o. Before he knew it, Ji-heon had become someone who could recognize her from a distance.

When Jeong-o spotted him approaching, she froze for a moment, then averted her gaze and hurriedly walked away. But her gait and expression seemed somehow precarious.

‘Did she overdrink yesterday and is struggling?’

That was about all he could guess.

He followed her and got on the elevator, but he couldn’t get close. The elevator was packed, and Jeong-o found himself trapped at the very back. Ji-heon was equally stuck and unable to move.

The elevator stopped on the 9th floor.

He thought that once he got off the elevator, he could talk to her for a moment, but she showed no intention of coming out.

After a moment, a hand waved slightly from among the crowd, revealing her presence. She had been sluggishly squirming at the back. For some reason, she seemed a bit off her game compared to usual.

The crowd wasn’t cooperating either, so Ji-heon had to grab Jeong-o’s hand firmly and pull her out of the elevator.

It was an action that broke free from reason. It always happened this way. Every time he faced Jeong-o, Ji-heon found himself acting unexpectedly, as if under a spell.

Just then, a small scream escaped, and the elevator door slammed shut with a violent thud.

Eek!

Poof.

The Jeong-o he had hastily pulled out was now in his arms.

She was small, fragile, and somewhere soft… her warm body leaned against him, swaying slightly.

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump.

His heart also felt out of control.

An unknown emotion began to seep through him, like ink spreading.

It was a strange excitement, yet somehow it felt like a longing for something vague…

‘Is it because of that dream from back then?’

She tilted her head up while leaning against him, looking at him with a flushed face.

He felt he knew this hot, contorted expression. He, too, felt a pang somewhere within him. Every part of him grew warm.

Ch23 - They Suit Each Other Well

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Dreams provoke desire.

But Ji-heon couldn’t move an inch.

Yesterday, she seemed quite lively, but today she appeared somewhat deflated.

As Jeong-o regained her balance, she slipped away from Ji-heon.

Her avoidance was sluggish, prompting Ji-heon to ask, “Are you in pain?”

“I’m fine.”

“Did you drink too much?”

“I have a cold.”

Jeong-o snapped back at his question, tossing out her answer before heading into the office first.

Hmph.

Is he giving me poison and then medicine?

Yesterday he scolded her so rudely, and today, why is he asking about her well-being?

It felt odd, as if he had been waiting for her since the lobby.

It was a situation she couldn’t avoid, but being in his embrace felt awkward.

Even the sound of his heartbeat in that fleeting moment was startling.

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump.

His chest was armored, yet what did that sound mean…?

It felt like a locomotive passing by.

“Manager, you’re here.”

Before she could even reflect on what had happened, she exchanged greetings with Gi-hoon.

“Yeah. Hi, Gi-hoon.”

Gi-hoon stood up and handed Jeong-o her bag and umbrella, which he had kept from the pub at her request the previous day.

“You really had a tough time yesterday. I can’t believe you even threw your bag away.”

“Phew. Thank you so much.”

Remembering what had happened last night, a sigh escaped her before she could greet him.

The day’s work began.

Jeong-o showed no signs of recovery.

Even the cool air from the air conditioner felt taxing. She regretted not bringing a coat on such a day.

Seeing her in such a state, Gi-hoon set a hangover remedy drink down at her desk, thinking she was struggling with a hangover.

“Thank you, Gi-hoon.”

Jeong-o managed a weak smile.

But she couldn’t bring herself to drink it. Even the lukewarm energy from the drink felt cold to her. She huddled herself up and continued with her work.

Dring, dring.

In the midst of this, her phone vibrated. Jeong-o laboriously moved her hand to pick up the phone.

– Let’s meet in the office for a moment.

Director Jeong Ji-heon.

The name she saved yesterday troubled her eyes.

He could have just called; why send a text? It put her in a strange mood.

Jeong-o glared quietly at her phone.

‘What on earth is he calling me to the office for again?’

Her body felt heavy enough as it was.

Now that she thought about it, he had been a bit odd since this morning.

Then again, he had done something quite wrong last night.

‘Could he be trying to apologize?’

She felt a flicker of hope.

Well, if he apologizes for last night, she would accept it.

Jeong-o slowly rose and made her way to the office.

Knock, knock.

“Yes.”

Ji-heon’s voice came from inside the office. Before she could grab the doorknob, the door opened from the inside.

Ji-heon swung the door wide open and ushered Jeong-o inside.

Though her body ached, she didn’t want to exude heat. Jeong-o responded as coldly as she could.

“I came because you called.”

“Did you get home okay yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“Take some medicine.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s just a cold,”

She looked up at Ji-heon with a flustered expression, her gaze dropping as it moved downward.

On the table he pointed to, there was a bundle of medicine.

Have you become a medicine vendor? Why is there so much medicine?

But Jeong-o refused. This was not what she wanted.

“I’m fine.”

“Take it. I specifically bought it for you, Jeong-o.”

“Why?”

“……”

“Why go through the trouble?”

With her tired body, she forced her eyes wide open and glared at him. A few steps forward, Ji-heon approached and picked up the bundle of medicine from the table.

“Take the medicine and don’t get sick.”

She had come expecting an apology, but instead…

“Recover and work properly.”

It was a carrot that a superior dangles in front of a subordinate.

Are you giving me poison and then medicine?

After teasing her so much yesterday, she was infuriated by this man’s fickleness, who today handed her a bundle of medicine.

Even so, she couldn’t voice her complaints, and she felt resentment toward her own lack of strength.

If only I had more strength, I could just stomp my foot! Just give him a piece of my mind!

She ground her teeth in frustration while silently glaring at him, but he too seemed dissatisfied with something. He squinted and returned to her, bringing something dark and heavy with him.

“Someone who is sick should wear something warm.”

His cardigan was draped over her shoulders.

Taken aback, she tried to push it off, but he quickly fastened one button of the cardigan.

Wearing the oversized cardigan felt like being wrapped in a blanket.

“……I’m fine.”

“Right. You look fine.”

His calm voice was gentle, like reading a fairy tale.

He seemed to be playing around. She felt awkward and, at the same time, overwhelmed.

It reminded her of seven years ago.

Our last day.

The day I checked the pregnancy test and then went to meet you. The day you took off your coat and put it on me.

That day, which I have reflected on countless times, you probably haven’t even thought about it.

“……I have style, you know.”

“You look good in it.”

He smiled subtly, clearly pleased with how she looked in his clothes, just like on that day seven years ago.

Seeing Jeong-o’s expression, which seemed a bit off, Ji-heon added a comment.

“Since I’ve never worn it, don’t say I gave it to you.”

“Then how about letting me leave early?”

“Well, do as you wish.”

“…….”

“Should I walk you out?”

Jeong-o felt even more awkward as Ji-heon readily agreed to walk her out without mentioning yesterday’s conversation or offering an apology, but

only focusing on trivial matters.

“……No, I’ll work.”

“……”

“I’ll just take one of the medicines.”

Jeong-o set down the bundle of medicine Ji-heon had given her and picked out a familiar-looking box from it.

Nod.

Ji-heon watched disapprovingly as Jeong-o nodded her head in farewell and hurriedly left.

She had bought all the over-the-counter medicine from the pharmacy, even glancing at the pharmacist, yet she still only took one more.

At least she quietly wore the cardigan, so maybe that’s something to be thankful for?

It was the first time someone’s cold had bothered him so much.

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Lunchtime arrived.

After taking the medicine Ji-heon gave her, Jeong-o gradually began to feel better. While she couldn’t run around energetically, her fever seemed to have dropped somewhat.

She should rest during lunchtime.

I won’t go outside the office; I’ll just lie down and take a little nap.

Jeong-o sighed as she massaged her weary fingers over the keyboard. At that moment, Team Leader Seong Mi-ran approached and called out to her.

“Jeong-o, are you able to eat?”

“Team Leader, I’ll stay in the office today.”

“Is it because you feel unwell? Can you at least eat some porridge?”

“I guess I could eat…”

“I ordered porridge for myself too. Let’s eat together.”

“I’m fine, really.”

“I ordered two servings, including yours. Come to the conference room.”

Though her body still felt heavy, Jeong-o couldn’t refuse when Mi-ran was being this considerate.

Yeah. Eating porridge will surely help me regain my strength.

Jeong-o followed Mi-ran out.

The menu Mi-ran chose was ‘Special Abalone Porridge’, which contained three times the amount of abalone found in regular abalone porridge.

It was precious food that couldn’t be wasted.

With a grateful heart, Jeong-o picked up her spoon. The smooth texture made it easy to swallow, and the taste was savory, prompting her to eat quickly.

It was truly fortunate that her appetite remained intact despite her heavy body. Perhaps the medicine had helped her feel a bit better. She started to feel a little grateful toward Ji-heon.

“How’s working at the company after moving?”

“It’s much more convenient since it’s closer than my previous company.”

“I’m really sorry about yesterday. I was so out of it that I only heard later how hard it was for you to drink.”

“It’s okay. I’m just glad it helped.”

“You’ve been through a lot. You don’t need to leave early today, right?”

“Yes, of course not.”

“Good. Let’s leave early today.”

Even if she didn’t care much for the headquarters or the head of the department, she was grateful for her team members. Especially Team Leader Seong Mi-ran, who was a great support. She was always there to back up Jeong-o’s opinions, which she appreciated.

However, Mi-ran seemed to have a slightly heavy expression today. It felt like she had something to say to Jeong-o.

As expected, when Jeong-o had nearly finished her bowl, Mi-ran cautiously called out her name.

“By the way, Jeong-o.”

“Yes, Team Leader.”

“I don’t know if I should ask this, but… I’m worried…”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“Um, Jeong-o…”

“……”

“What’s your relationship with Director Jeong Ji-heon?”

Jeong-o’s lips stiffened, determined to answer Mi-ran’s questions sincerely.

A chill ran down her spine.

“Did you two know each other from before?”

“……”

“Or perhaps, seven years ago? Was that when you met, when the director said he had lost his memory?”

It seemed Mi-ran knew more than expected.

–

Yesterday, since everyone in Production Team 1 had been drinking, today’s lunch menu was hangover soup.

After enjoying a hearty meal to recover, the members of Production Team 1 encountered Ji-heon in the lobby on the first floor.

The team leader, Ahn Chan-seob, was the first to greet him.

“Director, have you had lunch?”

“Yes.”

Si-nae, feeling a nudge from Chan-seob to acknowledge Ji-heon, pushed Eun-bi to move closer to him. Since Ji-heon was seated next to Eun-bi, she had to stand by him.

Eun-bi slightly shrank her shoulders and approached him.

However, for some reason, Ji-heon’s expression was colder than usual.

Ji-heon spoke to Chan-seob.

“About yesterday…”

“Yes? What about…?”

“Did Team 1 delegate the entertaining of the Team 2 staff to someone?”

At Ji-heon’s question, the members of Team 1 exchanged glances, blinking in confusion. Only Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae’s face turned bright red.

Eun-bi felt discouraged from getting any closer to Ji-heon.

“It seems our Jo Si-nae was too busy, so she entrusted it to Team 2’s Jeong Jeong-o. Of course, it was only for a moment until the other team members finished their work…”

“You entrusted the entertaining of a long-time advertiser to someone who has only been with the company for just over a week?”

“……”

“Did the team leader give this directive?”

His polite inquiry felt oddly chilling.

It felt as though he knew everything already.

Si-nae trembled all over, sensing Ji-heon’s gaze fixed on her.

The atmosphere in the first-floor lobby felt as if cold water had been thrown over it, leaving an eerie silence.

“No, I…”

As Chan-seob hesitated, Si-nae quickly stepped forward.

“Director, it was my request. The team leader found out later. But we were really too busy, and it couldn’t be helped. Jeong-o was just sitting idly.”

“Understood. You were busy. We just need to ensure this doesn’t happen again.”

“Yes, I will be more careful.”

At least Ji-heon quickly understood the situation, which was a relief.

Si-nae let out a sigh of relief inwardly.

However.

“Then let’s take a look at yesterday’s results.”

Si-nae slowly lifted her pale face to look at Ji-heon.

The workload from yesterday had been rejected this morning…

“……What?”

“The result of the reason you were so busy yesterday. Let’s review what Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae worked on.”

That handsome face, once the object of admiration for all employees, now appeared chillingly menacing.

Ch24 - It's mine, don't touch it.

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When Jeong-o couldn’t respond at all, Team Leader Seong Mi-ran awkwardly brushed her hair back.

“No. You don’t have to say anything. There must be a reason.”

“……”

“I could sense it from the beginning. Every time you talked about Director Jeong Ji-heon, your expression changed a bit.”

Last Tuesday, after the meeting, Mi-ran overheard a conversation between Eun-bi and Si-nae in the bathroom.

It was about Jeong-o.

Having worked at the company for nearly ten years, Mi-ran had heard all sorts of strange rumors, so she didn’t usually pay much attention to gossip in the restroom.

However, it bothered her a little that the source of the gossip was Manager Chae Eun-bi.

Mi-ran also didn’t know that Jeong-o and Eun-bi were acquainted. Neither had shown any signs of it.

Mi-ran recalled the events since Jeong-o joined the company, one by one.

Jeong-o had definitely acted strangely when she first met Ji-heon. Even Director Jeong noticed Jeong-o’s unusual reaction and called her back to his

office.

Then there was the incident in front of the elevator when Ji-heon had grabbed her wrist, and particularly the moment when Jeong-o had asked about Ji-heon's accident seven years ago.

And yesterday, when Jeong-o had gone out to entertain the client, Ji-heon had followed her.

It seemed like there was something between them, as if they had known each other for a long time and had quickly grown close.

However, Mi-ran wasn't sure if it was appropriate to inquire about their relationship, which made her cautious in her tone.

Still, still… if Jeong-o's work life were to suffer because of Director Jeong Ji-heon, Mi-ran felt she would regret it for a long time, prompting her to speak up.

"…I'm just worried. Director Ji-heon is getting married soon, right? Plus, you both work for the same company."

Jeong-o lowered her head deeply. It was a half-hearted acknowledgment.

Mi-ran felt a pang of regret for bringing up something so uncomfortable.

"…Have you thought about seriously talking to the director?"

"I'm still not sure."

"Jeong-o, if you want to drink, just say so. Even if I can't solve your problems with the director, I can listen to your troubles."

Jeong-o's eyes turned red.

She was grateful that Mi-ran wasn't prying into her life or chastising her for her situation. It seemed Mi-ran wouldn't show any signs of discomfort.

"And."

“Yes, Team Leader.”

“You can’t resign. Got it?”

This was actually what Mi-ran wanted to say.

For a team leader, losing a team member is critical. Mi-ran was determined to protect her team members diligently.

Jeong-o nodded with a smile.

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Ji-heon went with the members of Production Team 1 to review Jo Si-nae’s work from the previous night.

Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae nervously pulled a file from the recycling bin on her PC with trembling hands.

“Is this it?”

“Yes. But the client didn’t like it this morning, so I have to redo it.”

“Then yesterday’s work is useless.”

Jo Si-nae’s face turned bright red. The atmosphere in the office became tense, like the calm before a storm. Everyone gulped dryly, glancing at Ji-heon’s expressionless face.

“It’s disappointing. You worked so hard, yet there’s no result.”

“……”

“Perhaps you should go for a team dinner instead.”

At the sarcastic mutter that felt like a calm whisper, Si-nae couldn’t even lift her face.

“Anyway, I understand. It can’t be helped. It’s tough to win over clients.”

Ji-heon took a step back after a moment, as if to say it was unavoidable.

Thank goodness it ended there. Si-nae secretly let out a sigh of relief.

However, before Ji-heon left the team, he added one more thing.

“From now on, Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae is to report her work daily at 6 PM.”

“……What?”

“There’s no need to come in person; just send it to me via email.”

Just when she thought she could take a breather!

Even after Ji-heon left, the members of Team 1 continued to look at Si-nae with pity.

What she had done to help Eun-bi had completely backfired with Director Jeong Ji-heon.

Si-nae desperately grabbed Eun-bi’s sleeve.

“Manager, what should I do…?”

“Oh dear. I was in a tight spot yesterday too. It’s okay. It’s okay. I’ll talk to oppa and sort it out.”

Eun-bi comforted Si-nae and then headed to Ji-heon’s office.

Si-nae clenched her fists at her desk. She couldn’t forgive Jeong-o for snitching on her for getting the work done.

After Ji-heon entered his office, Eun-bi followed him in.

“Oppa.”

Ji-heon didn’t respond and sat down, flipping through the papers in front of him.

“Did something bad happen?”

“…….”

“Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae works hard, and if you scold her for that, the other employees will get scared.”

When Ji-heon didn’t reply again, Eun-bi changed her question.

“Why weren’t you reachable yesterday?”

“…….”

“Yesterday, Eun-yeob oppa came by to meet you too. Did you contact him?”

After a long pause, Ji-heon finally answered.

“Yeah.”

“What did he say?”

“He didn’t say much.”

Eun-bi felt hurt by Ji-heon’s indifferent response, especially after receiving a scolding from Eun-yeob yesterday.

Marriage.

She had been running toward a clear goal, believing that she could finally see the finish line. She had thought Ji-heon would naturally accept marriage, but now she felt anxious for some reason.

With a twitch at the corner of her mouth, Eun-bi found it hard to smile.

Finally managing to open her mouth, she spoke.

“Mom mentioned marriage. What should I do?”

“You can just figure it out.”

That was the only thing she managed to get out, but his answer seemed as lackluster as the fingers flipping through the documents.

“Figure it out how?”

“Our mom knows you better than I do, right?”

His callous attitude didn’t just leave her cold; Eun-bi was merely holding back. For the sake of the marriage she would someday grasp, she was swallowing her pride and enduring.

That’s why she could only count the days until the marriage.

“Okay. Let’s say I vaguely tell Mom about it. What about you, oppa?”

“…….”

“What do you want to do?”

“I’m not so shameless as to ask you for marriage.”

“……What if I want to? What if I ask?”

At her question, he slowly stopped what he was doing and looked at her. He just stared. Yet, she couldn’t bring herself to speak again.

You? Someone like you?

It felt as if words he had never uttered were being lodged in her mind by some unknown force.

His expression held a mix of contempt and laughter, neither one truly there.

The arrogant, cold gaze looking down on her sent shivers down Eun-bi’s spine.

After staring at her for a long moment, he finally spoke.

“Then we should break up.”

“…….”

“Of course, we never even dated.”

Without changing his expression, he looked down and casually returned to his work.

“It’s not like there’s any history between us, right? Just tell Mom we broke up.”

Eun-bi shook her head stubbornly, unable to say a word.

She couldn’t do as Ji-heon suggested. This was no longer something that could end with just a word.

There was so much Ji-heon didn’t know.

Eun-bi had spread rumors about her relationship with Ji-heon to many people in the company, and about 95% of it was lies.

Without marriage, she wouldn’t be able to maintain her dignity or hold her head high at work.

It would shock all her family members.

“Does it really come out so easily for you?”

“I don’t understand why it’s so hard for you.”

“…….”

“I’m busy, so I’ll be leaving now.”

His always emotionless voice tightened around Eun-bi’s chest. She knew that if she pressed him further, she would lose even the freedom to storm into this office. Gritting her teeth, she left the office.

On her way out, she ran into Seung-kyu.

He appeared annoyingly cheerful, humming a tune for no good reason, and Eun-bi looked at him with a sour expression before letting out a huff of laughter.

“Oppa, I’m busy right now.”

“Oh, really?”

Even though Ji-heon had warned him that he was busy, Seung-kyu didn’t turn around. Eun-bi’s face twisted in irritation.

“Are you going in?”

“I’m just checking how hard my friend is working.”

“Hah!”

Eun-bi scoffed again and walked away with heavy footsteps.

Seung-kyu glared at Eun-bi’s retreating figure, then turned his head.

Seung-kyu and Eun-bi had not gotten along well since seven years ago. Seung-kyu disliked Eun-yeob, Eun-bi’s older brother, who was a high school classmate, and he didn’t like Eun-bi either.

He hated Eun-yeob’s cunningness and disliked Eun-bi’s pretentiousness. He simply didn’t impose his standards on Ji-heon.

When Seung-kyu opened the office door, he hesitated at Ji-heon’s fierce gaze.

Thinking it was yet another confrontation with Cha Eun-bi, Ji-heon’s glare softened upon recognizing his friend.

“Did something happen with Cha Eun-bi? She looked really angry. Did you two fight?”

“No.”

“Right, you wouldn’t fight.”

Seung-kyu plopped down on the sofa as he spoke.

“She’s particularly respectful toward you, isn’t she?”

“I can’t treat her lightly.”

Ji-heon answered while resting his chin on his hand and flipping through documents.

He had no choice but to be respectful to Eun-bi. Seven years ago, she had reported Ji-heon’s accident and helped catch the hit-and-run driver.

When Ji-heon was in a coma, she took great care of his mother, Jang Young-mi, to ensure she wouldn’t fall into despair. It seemed that bond had helped them maintain a good relationship since then.

Besides, their families knew each other, and she was the sister of his friend, Cha Eun-yeob.

With so many connections, he couldn’t simply ignore her.

Seung-kyu knew all of this too.

“Still, you should sort things out. If there’s someone you really want to date.”

“There’s no one.”

Ji-heon immediately denied Seung-kyu’s advice without hesitation.

“Right. It’s not like you want to date anyone right now, but you wouldn’t mind sharing an umbrella, would you?”

“…….”

“No, wait. Not an umbrella, a coat. You were sharing a coat, weren’t you?”

“…….”

“I saw everything yesterday, Jeong Ji-heon. You were filming it all out in the open.”

As Seung-kyu teased him again, Ji-heon fell into deep thought.

“Do you want to deny it? That’s all romantic feelings.”

Even so, accepting the awkward phrase “romantic feelings” was difficult.

The feelings Ji-heon had were fairly clear.

It was a reaction to the appearance of a woman named Lee Jeong-oh.

It was an emotion that arose simply because she was a woman and he was a man.

It was a primal urge, like hunger.

He wanted to make it clear that this wasn’t a romantic feeling, but Seung-kyu pressed him teasingly.

“You’re worried about her getting wet, but you don’t like her?”

“Yeah.”

“You want to be near her, but you don’t like her?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re concerned about her being hurt, but you don’t like her.”

“…….”

“I saw Lee Jeong-oh wearing the cardigan I bought you. Even so, you don’t have those feelings?”

“……Was that what you gave me?”

“What a heartless kid.”

It felt strange to attach a clear reason to emotions that were hard to define and people that were difficult to understand.

“……It’s just that her appearance is exactly my type.”

“…….”

“I’ve never felt this way before. Not in 33 years. That’s why it’s annoying.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That’s called pure love.”

A heartless friend had developed pure feelings. Seung-kyu’s smile had stretched to the point that it could be described as overwhelming.

Ji-heon still found it hard to accept.

After all, he had only seen her for the first time just ten days ago; there was no way it could be pure love.

“Anyway, do well. I won’t help you.”

“Who asked for your help?”

“Still, one day you’ll be begging me for help.”

With that boastful remark, Seung-kyu strolled around the office with a leisurely pace before suddenly stopping in a corner.

There was a yellow umbrella leaning against the wall.

“This umbrella—what’s this?”

It was something Ji-heon had left behind after briefly returning to the office following his separation from Jeong-oh the night before.

“You probably don’t need this, do you? Should I take it? I can give it to my daughter.”

“No.”

“…….”

“It’s mine. Don’t touch it.”

At Ji-heon’s serious expression, Seung-kyu sniffed in amusement.

This guy, now that he’s interested in women, he’s also become materialistic.

After all, having human desires was a good sign. Seung-kyu chuckled and left the office.

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Friday evening. Team members began to leave their seats one by one, liberated from overtime.

This weekend was promised to be free. There would be no peaceful weekends during the war-like competition for presentations.

So they had to rest well this weekend. They would spend a lot of time with Ye-na, too.

After finishing her work, Jeong-oh packed her bag, contemplating how to spend the weekend.

Her hand last brushed against the cardigan she had taken off.

In the morning, when her muscles were aching, she had gratefully accepted it from Ji-heon, but now that she had taken some medicine and was feeling better, she regretted it.

She also felt a bit resentful toward Ji-heon, who had draped the cardigan over her shoulders while she was vulnerable, both physically and mentally.

‘Still, I should wash it and return it.’

Jeong-oh put the cardigan in her bag.

As she left the office and made her way to the central corridor, she ran into Ji-heon again. He seemed to be heading out for the day as well.

Seeing him made her feel heat rise in her cheeks again.

‘Don’t be timid.’

Jeong-oh stepped forward bravely. Of course, with the remnants of her cold, her body wasn’t as spirited as her mind.

The elevator was taking too long. The two of them stood side by side in front of it.

She could feel his eyelids lowering as he looked at her. Stubbornly, Jeong-oh focused straight ahead and said, “I’ll wash the cardigan and return it to you.”

“Just keep it.”

He spread out his large hand, one that seemed capable of effortlessly lifting a basketball.

“I need to take care of the washing since it’s something precious a friend bought for me.”

“Okay.”

Why did she lend something so precious to him?

She couldn’t understand his thoughts, but without further comment, Jeong-oh took the cardigan out of her bag and handed it to him.

“Thank you for letting me wear it. I really appreciated it.”

“Deputy!”

After handing over the cardigan, Gi-hun rushed over from the office, calling for Jeong-oh.

“Director, are you leaving now?”

Seeing Jeong-oh and Ji-heon standing together, Gi-hun politely bowed and then spoke to Jeong-oh again.

“Deputy, I brought my car today. Would you like a ride?”

“It’s Friday evening; don’t you have plans?”

“I’m going to Hwayang-dong, so do you want to go together?”

“Well, if that’s the case.”

Jeong-oh gladly accepted Gi-hun’s kindness. He was the most comfortable colleague at the company.

But then Ji-heon called out to Gi-hun.

“Song Gi-hun, it sounds like the phone is ringing in the office, but no one is picking up.”

Indeed, a phone ringing could be heard from somewhere.

“Ah? Deputy, just a moment!”

Gi-hun dashed back to the office.

Now only the two of them were left in front of the elevator.

Ji-heon draped the cardigan over Jeong-oh’s shoulders again.

“Just wear it while you go.”

It happened so suddenly that Jeong-oh didn’t have time to stop him.

While Jeong-oh stood frozen in surprise, Gi-hun ran out of the office and said, “Deputy, you should go first. I need to quickly send an email.”

“Uh-huh. Got it. Thanks for your hard work.”

“Yes.”

After Gi-hun left, Ji-heon continued speaking.

“Since it’s something precious that a friend bought for me, make sure to return it on Monday.”

“…….”

“You can also give it back over the weekend.”

Was he joking? Was he serious?

The smile he wore seemed somehow wicked.

Jeong-oh couldn’t say anything for fear that he might ask her to come in over the weekend.

Ch25 - I Like You, Deputy

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Saturday morning.

Ye-na marked an “X” on the calendar, counting down the days. Her birthday was now just five days away.

Looking at the X marks Ye-na had collected on the calendar, she realized how meaningless the past days had been.

“Ye-na, all I want to do on my birthday is eat cake with Mom and Grandma. Are you still looking forward to it?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Why?”

“Because Mom will come home early.”

Jeong-oh couldn’t help but reflect on how much she had neglected to take care of her child.

I work because I love you the most, yet I don’t have enough time to show you that love.

Moms always feel sorry for their children.

“And Mom will give me a present. That’s why I’m happy.”

Ye-na had already picked out her present a long time ago. She said she wanted a coding robot. Worried that the product might sell out, Jeong-oh

bought it early. The gift had already arrived last Thursday, and Ye-na knew about it.

What must it feel like to wait until her birthday for a present that was already at home?

The child was patiently counting down the days, eagerly anticipating what she wanted to receive.

Jeong-oh sat Ye-na on her lap and looked at the calendar together.

Turning a page, she saw a circle drawn for Monday, June 7.

“Ye-na, why did you mark this circle?”

“Because it’s the day I go to Do-bin’s house.”

Smiling beautifully at the circle on June 7, Ye-na wandered into the living room.

In the meantime, Jeong-oh picked up her phone to check her text messages.

There was a message from Ji-heon that had arrived overnight. It contained a brief note along with a web link.

– I thought you might like this as a copywriter.

It was a video of a lecture by a famous overseas creator that Jeong-oh recognized.

It would indeed be very informative, but Jeong-oh felt put off.

‘Why send a lecture on a Friday night?’

Displeased, she flipped her phone over and sat quietly when Ye-na returned with a Go board and stones.

“Mom, let’s play Go.”

“I don’t know how to play Go.”

“Then I’ll teach you.”

Ye-na’s enthusiasm for Go was always genuine.

Becoming her Go teacher, Ye-na passionately explained the game. Jeong-oh knew some of it but also had many gaps in her knowledge.

The more she didn’t know, the more she had to concentrate, yet since checking Ji-heon’s text, her mind felt distracted.

Should she reply or not?

If she replied, it seemed like the conversation might drag on.

Yesterday, Team Leader Seong Mi-ran’s words came to mind.

“… I’m just worried. The director is going to get married soon, right? Plus, you work at the same company.”

She couldn’t create something for her colleagues to worry about.

Before he could approach, Jeong-oh needed to push him away first.

While she was lost in thought, Ye-na raised her voice.

“Mom, Mom! In Go, you save with the line, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. The line…”

“The line is the vital point, and the other side isn’t the vital point. You have to go to the vital point. Got it?”

“Okay. You have to go to the vital point.”

Right. In Go, as in life, you have to go to the vital point. That’s how you survive.

Jeong-oh gained enlightenment from Teacher Lee Ye-na’s lessons.

‘Yes. I just need Ye-na.’

I have to protect my line first.

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For someone, it was just dipping a toe in and pulling it back, but the weekend had slipped away completely.

But for Ji-heon, it was a dull weekend.

A wedding of a not-so-close friend, a meal with the advertising client representative, and a call from his mother…

What he wanted always seemed out of reach, while unwanted events kept piling up.

On Friday, he had sent a beneficial text message to Assistant Lee Jeong-oh, but she had left it on “read.”

Finally, when Monday came around, he felt a breath of fresh air.

– Yes. I’ll look at it.

At exactly 9 a.m. on Monday, he received a text message from Jeong-oh.

Ji-heon read and reread the seven neatly written characters.

It seemed to be a reply to the text message he sent on Friday night.

“Looked at it well” or “I will look at it well”? Now?

Ji-heon snorted with laughter and immediately replied.

– Are you sending a reply three days later?

Drrr. This time, the reply came quite quickly.

– It’s work. Just one working day, excluding the weekend.

– You send texts like packages.

The expression that had been locked away all weekend finally loosened. Ji-heon sent another message right away.

– Yes. That’s correct. Work is processed based on working days. If you want same-day delivery, please send it before 3 p.m. on weekdays.

– No, same-day reply.

Seeing the two messages arrive side by side, Ji-heon couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

Thinking that his laughter might have escaped outside his office, he cleared his throat and straightened up before sending one more message: the link to the video collection of the creator’s works he had sent on Friday night.

– I think it’d be good to watch this together.

– Yes. Message received. I’ll take care of it.

He chuckled.

For some reason, he could almost imagine her expression when she sent that text.

He didn’t mind her audacity and shamelessness in taking his message as just a bothersome task.

It was so amusing that a new desire was quietly budding within him.

He wanted to keep her sitting next to him.

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In the afternoon, a meeting for the new product advertisement of Dawon Brewery was held.

The AE briefed on the updates since last week's meeting.

"After last week's dinner meeting, Dawon Brewery gave us several comments. First, the client showed interest in all our ideas, and they said they were all good… and they want us to combine all these ideas."

The production team was understandably shocked by the AE's hesitant announcement.

"Combine? Combine?"

"What are we supposed to do with that? Make budae jjigae?"

The AE continued the briefing steadfastly.

"They want us to prepare three drafts after combining them."

"Three after combining? If we combine them, wouldn't it just be one?"

"That's basically the same as saying to prepare everything again."

Assistant Jo Si-nae's voice was especially angry. In an unexpected turn, the blame fell on Jeong-oh.

"Assistant Lee Jeong-oh. Don't you have anything to say?"

"What is there to say?"

"If you hadn't mentioned this and that to the client at Thursday's dinner, I don't think we would be in this situation."

"I only said what Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob said I could."

Jeong-oh responded without being discouraged by Si-nae's criticism.

"Well, that's possible! Now that we've figured out the client's intent, that's a relief. Hm-hm."

Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob from Production Team 1 cleared his throat and added a pitiful excuse.

“What about the deadline?”

Jeong-oh asked about the deadline.

“First of all, they want us to send the first proposal by this Friday. They don’t need a storyboard in the first proposal; they just want a script based on storytelling,” said the team leader.

“A first proposal? So they’re saying they want to turn everything upside down again. That’s too much.”

“We have to do our best to pass the first stage.”

“How is that easy?”

As the production team members continued to grumble, the planning team leader stepped in.

“Time is tight, but I’d appreciate your cooperation. Also, please prepare a good amount of copy candidates, both in quality and quantity. Dawon Brewery is notoriously picky when it comes to selecting copy, you know?”

Eun-bi looked at Jeong-oh and said, “I’d like Assistant Lee Jeong-oh to handle the final arrangement of the drafts. She has talked the most with the client individually, and there isn’t much work assigned to her.”

The members of Production Team 1 nodded. It felt like everyone was trying to dodge responsibilities.

Jeong-oh decided to accept Eun-bi’s suggestion.

It seemed much better to take charge and move things along rather than getting dragged around and losing time.

Thursday was her daughter’s birthday. She had to finish her work before then.

“Yes. Then I’d appreciate your cooperation. Please send your ideas to me via email. Since time is short, I hope we can at least share our thoughts for an hour each evening. I’ll take care of the compilation and organization.”

“Wow. That’s refreshing!”

As Jeong-oh made her decisive move, Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob applauded.

Since Jeong-oh ended up taking most of the work, the meeting wrapped up quickly.

As she was among the last to organize the meeting room, Eun-bi approached her.

“Assistant Lee Jeong-oh, here’s my copy for now. You can reflect it without calling a meeting.”

Eun-bi immediately handed her a piece of paper. A few lines were handwritten on it.

“…You didn’t organize this separately?”

“I worked on it by hand.”

“This is just a memo level. Could you please organize it thoughtfully and send it as a file?”

“If I give you a file done thoroughly, you’ll just copy and paste it without any sincerity, right? Since you’re the one who has to organize it anyway, it’d be good for you to transcribe my thoughts and my copies yourself as a way to study.”

“…”

“What’s so difficult about that?”

Yeah. That’s how it is.

The planning team leader was watching. It seemed like Chae Eun-bi was trying hard to make Jeong-oh look unreasonable.

Jeong-oh quickly made a judgment that seemed to avoid any fallout.

“Then I’ll take care of your memo, Manager. Since I’m organizing this, you know I’ll be doing the final report, right? Don’t feel too disappointed if your copy doesn’t make it in the end.”

Eun-bi’s face slightly contorted before she left.

Gi-hun, who had been watching from the side, secretly gave a thumbs up.

After Eun-bi left, the planning team leader spoke to Gi-hun.

“Gi-hun, this is a different topic, but we have another presentation next Wednesday. Could you help design the proposal? They say when you handle proposals, they turn out artistic. Do you have some time this evening?”

“Ah… Are you talking about today?”

Gi-hun hesitated to give a definite answer as he considered his schedule. He was already juggling a lot of work for a new employee, and now another task was being added. Jeong-oh quickly sensed that it would be difficult for Gi-hun to refuse and interjected between the two.

“How about starting next Monday? Gi-hun has a lot of work to do in the team as well. I think it would be possible to start on Monday.”

“Ah… Is there a lot of work? Then we should do that. Gi-hun, please take care of it next Monday.”

After the planning team leader left, Gi-hun let out a long sigh of relief when it was just him and Jeong-oh left in the meeting room.

“Phew, thanks to you, I survived, Assistant. Thank you.”

Jeong-oh felt a bit sorry for Gi-hun.

“Gi-hun, you’ve been pulled around for requests like this, haven’t you?”

“How did you know?”

“People who handle proposals well get called for these kinds of things. Since proposals are revised and revised until the last day of the competitive presentation, there’s no need to waste energy on it from now. You can handle it on Monday. If they don’t call you then, it’ll just pass by.”

Gi-hun nodded blankly, his lips parted as if he had gained a great revelation.

“Got it?”

A dependable ally he could trust and rely on. The cool Assistant Lee.

Now that he thought about it, things had become easier since Jeong-oh joined the team. He had received a lot of help from her, not only with organizing meetings and writing minutes but also in discussing meal menus and keeping track of schedules.

While he had felt somewhat awkward with the team members at first, he had gradually become comfortable with everyone.

Gi-hun realized that Jeong-oh had softened and warmed the team atmosphere.

She was more of a mentor than his official supervisor, Ko Eun-joo, and was a reassuring presence.

Sometimes she felt like a warm older sister, and other times like a like-minded friend.

Plus, she was pretty, fun, and smart. Thinking about it, Jeong-oh was his ideal type.

As Jeong-oh was about to leave the meeting room, Gi-hun called out to her.

“Assistant, I have something to say.”

“Uh, go ahead.”

He thought it was best to quickly secure a good position before someone else reached out.

“I like you.”

At that moment—

Knock knock.

A hurried and somewhat irritated knock echoed.

The conversation and the confession were abruptly interrupted.

Someone had banged loudly on the open meeting room door. It wasn’t a gentle ‘knock knock,’ but rather a forceful ‘bang bang.’

Standing at the door was Jeong Ji-heon.

His tightly clenched fist, having knocked so hard, looked somewhat barbaric.

“Assistant Lee Jeong-oh.”

Ji-heon called out to Jeong-oh without hesitation, his expression so serious it looked intimidating enough to be there to collect a debt.

“Yes, Director.”

“Don’t you have something to give me?”

Jeong-oh’s eyes, which had been round and bright toward Gi-hun, now shook fearfully toward Ji-heon.

“My clothes.”

The gaze Ji-heon directed at Jeong-oh and Gi-hun was so piercing it felt suffocating.

Ch26 - The Child's Birthday (1)

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After finishing an external task and returning to the company, Ji-heon first checked the meeting room before heading to his office.

He had heard that Daewon Liquor had requested the first proposal, and the AE had called a meeting.

It seemed the meeting had just concluded. Ji-heon received a summary of the meeting from the AE who was coming out of the room.

After grasping the meeting details, he became curious about Jeong-oh’s expression, as it seemed she had taken on a lot of the work. She appeared to still be in the meeting room.

As he took a few steps closer, he could hear a man and a woman’s voices. The woman was Jeong-oh, and the man seemed to be Song Gi-hun, a member of the same team.

Jeong-oh and Gi-hun seemed to be quite close.

As he approached the meeting room, their affectionate conversation began to irritate him.

“Assistant, I have something to say.”

“Uh, go ahead.”

“I like you.”

Gi-hun’s sudden confession reached Ji-heon’s ears, and he could no longer listen to their conversation. He knocked loudly on the meeting room door to interrupt them.

He knocked forcefully on the already open door, blocking the two from continuing their conversation.

“Assistant Lee Jeong-oh.”

The two turned their heads in unison. Their expressions were similar, causing Ji-heon to clench his fists tightly.

“Yes, Director.”

“Don’t you have something to give me?”

“……”

“My clothes.”

With her lips parted in surprise, Jeong-oh’s eyes trembled momentarily before she responded.

“……Ah… yes, just a moment.”

As he watched Jeong-oh dash out of the meeting room, Ji-heon let out a faint sigh.

He leaned against the door and gazed into the meeting room.

Because Ji-heon was blocking the way, Gi-hun found himself stuck inside the meeting room, aimlessly fidgeting after everything had already been tidied up.

Gi-hun glanced nervously around, and Ji-heon scrutinized him.

He was a young male employee whose face clearly showed he had lived without many ups and downs.

He was relatively diligent, got along well with other employees, and received good evaluations from the team leader.

And trusting only his youth and impetuousness, he had confessed to Lee Jeong-oh……

Ji-heon narrowed his eyes, staring at Gi-hun for a long time.

After a while, Jeong-oh rushed back and held out the cardigan in front of Ji-heon.

“Thank you, Director.”

“I said you didn’t have to wash it.”

“……”

“How’s your cold?”

“Yes, I’m all better.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Jeong-oh couldn’t look Ji-heon in the eye.

Now that she was completely recovered from her cold, he felt like pressing her on why she was ignoring his messages.

With her head down, she slipped past Ji-heon and called out to Gi-hun.

“Gi-hun, if you’re done tidying up, come out.”

“Yes!”

Gi-hun hurried out of the meeting room at Jeong-oh’s beckoning.

The two of them passed by Ji-heon and returned to their seats.

“Hmm.”

As Jeong-oh was about to sit down, Gi-hun deliberately cleared his throat and leaned toward her.

“That cardigan is yours, right? From last Friday.”

Gi-hun asked in a lowered voice. Jeong-oh couldn’t respond.

“So that cardigan belongs to the director.”

“I was really sick and looked cold, so the director lent it to me.”

“The director surprisingly has a caring side, huh?”

With a tone that seemed both surprised and teasing, Gi-hun’s comment made Jeong-oh bite her lip to hide her feelings.

At that moment, Ji-heon appeared like a reaper beyond the partition of Team 2 and called out to Gi-hun.

“Song Gi-hun?”

“Yes, Director.”

Gi-hun stood up from his seat.

“I checked the outlet design; it looks like it needs some hands-on work.”

A tremor passed through Gi-hun’s eyes.

“Bring your tools to the office.”

Ji-heon shook Gi-hun with an unreadable expression before leaving first.

Another tremor passed beneath Gi-hun’s feet. Stumbling, he slumped back into his chair with a face that looked like he had lost a country, hurriedly gathering his tools to leave.

Ko Eun-joo, who felt sorry for Gi-hun, asked him.

“Gi-hun, should I go instead?”

“No…… I worked on it, so I should go. I’ll be back soon.”

After Gi-hun left, shoulders slumped, Eun-joo shook her head and muttered to herself.

“I really don’t like Director Jeong……”

Ji Ji-heon was steadily accumulating resentment.

Jeong-oh forced a bitter smile and immediately sat down.

Two hours later, Gi-hun returned. He looked exhausted after working hard for two hours.

Deputy Park Young-gwang was the first to comfort him.

“Gi-hun, you did well.”

“Huah.”

“How was it?”

“What do you think? I was alone with the director in the office…”

“……”

“I almost became a turtle. I thought I was going to die of awkwardness…”

Jeong-oh reached out and patted Gi-hun’s shoulder.

Before sitting down, Gi-hun took a large phone charger out of his back pocket and set it down.

“My phone battery died, so I said I would step out for a bit, and the director gave this to me. I couldn’t refuse…”

“……”

“……I think the director is surprisingly really caring…”

Gi-hun’s rambling continued intermittently after that.

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Ji-heon’s appearance buried Gi-hun’s sudden confession. Jeong-oh managed to avoid an awkward situation by chance, but her mind was not at ease.

Was it sincere, or just light camaraderie?

Gi-hun’s attitude had not changed since then. He was warm and respectful. He never brought up what he said in the meeting room again.

‘It must just be camaraderie.’

What had been a cautious assumption in her heart solidified into a judgment after a day had passed.

However, not long after she made that conclusion, Gi-hun spoke to her.

“You haven’t said anything.”

It was after another meeting had ended, and Jeong-oh was alone in the meeting room, preparing the Daewon Liquor proposal.

Jeong-oh asked blankly, “……What?”

“There was something I mentioned yesterday. In that other meeting room.”

“Uh… um…”

Once they were alone, and Gi-hun initiated the conversation again, Jeong-oh realized that they hadn’t had a moment alone until now.

Flustered, she hesitated and finally responded.

“I like you too, Gi-hun.”

“That’s not what I meant, Assistant.”

“……”

“I mean, in a rational way. Different sexes.”

Not liking Jeong-oh’s nuance, Gi-hun clarified his words.

He confessed without trembling, confidently and comfortably.

Kids these days are like this.

Gi-hun’s bright energy captured Jeong-oh’s attention.

The situation became a little more awkward.

To Jeong-oh, Gi-hun was just a comfortable and obedient junior colleague; nothing more.

“Are you serious?”

“Of course. Should I say it again? I like you, Assistant…”

“No! It’s okay.”

Jeong-oh hurriedly waved her hands.

Phew. Gi-hun pressed his lips together, and only then did she breathe a sigh of relief.

Kids these days are like this…

In truth, the age difference isn’t that big. Maybe because I’m a mother, but twenty-seven-year-old guys seem very young.

I feel like I’m living in a different era from Song Gi-hun.

“I thought you were just joking.”

“Who jokes around like that?”

What should I do?

If I refuse harshly, will he get hurt?

Gi-hun was such a nice person; she wanted to reject him kindly.

However, she worried that a kind rejection might leave room for misunderstanding.

“Because it’s a profession that pursues beauty, I do find myself interested in people’s appearances.”

“……”

“Assistant, you’re really pretty, but I don’t think you realize it. That makes you even more charming.”

“No! I know! I know very well! I’m pretty. I’m very pretty.”

“Ha. Exactly. You’re pretty.”

“No, I’m not. Look here. I have wrinkles, you know?”

“You’re being so contradictory, it’s funny.”

Is this a crush? It was fascinating how Gi-hun only saw her in a good light.

Gi-hun’s courtship continued.

“It’s just enjoyable to observe you, Assistant. The more I see, the more interesting and cool things I notice, and I like you more.”

“Are you perhaps the type who falls in love easily?”

“I’m a romantic! Before I went to the army once, and once after coming back. I’ve only dated twice… No, why am I talking about this?”

Gi-hun babbled on and then laughed to himself, realizing how silly he sounded being so honest in front of her.

“Anyway, it means I like you. You, Assistant.”

Jeong-oh felt sorry for the smiling Gi-hun.

Right now, Gi-hun might be trying hard to create a cheerful atmosphere while being very nervous, not wanting to burden her.

Although the situation was uncomfortable, if he was serious, she had no choice but to give a serious answer in return.

“Gi-hun, I have something to say too.”

With her resolve firm, Jeong-oh opened her mouth.

“I’m actually a mother.”

“……”

At Jeong-oh’s confession, Gi-hun’s eyes widened in surprise, like someone who just got hit with a splash of cold water.

Jeong-oh’s confession continued.

“My child is seven years old now.”

Gi-hun’s face went blank.

“……Assistant, I’m a bit hurt right now.”

“……”

“It’s one thing to not like me, but to reject me like this…”

“I’m serious.”

Gi-hun’s sullen expression made Jeong-oh’s gaze even stricter.

“I’m telling the truth.”

Jeong-oh took out her phone and found a picture to show him. It was a photo of Yena sitting on Jeong-oh’s lap.

“This is my daughter. I didn’t adopt her; she’s my real daughter.”

“……”

“I don’t have a husband, but I do have a child. This Thursday is her birthday.”

With a dazed expression, Gi-hun stared at the photo for a long time and muttered to himself.

“But no one said anything about this…”

“It’s just that I have my reasons. I’m not married, so it’s recorded as ‘single’ in the company’s records, and when the company requests my resident registration document, I just submitted one with my information. So, no one knows.”

“……”

“I’m telling you because you’re so nice. You’re the first person I’ve told this in this company.”

Gi-hun looked more shocked than when he was held back by Director Jeong Ji-heon yesterday.

Although Jeong-oh felt sorry for saying this to Gi-hun, she also felt relieved in a way.

“I really appreciate that you see me in a good light, but this is my situation. I’ll live my life focusing on protecting my daughter. I’m sorry.”

“……”

“I truly support your dating life. You’ll find a great woman.”

It seemed that her confession had a good effect.

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Tasks piled up one by one, forming a mountain.

The hardest part was having to do both physical and mental work at the same time.

If only she could concentrate more, she could come up with better ideas, and if she had more time, she could gather more data and produce better results. Those moments of regret also accumulated.

Late nights continued from Monday and Tuesday into Wednesday. Jeong-oh was desperate since Thursday was Yena’s birthday.

And the long-awaited Thursday morning arrived!

“Mom! What day is it today?”

Yena, unusually awake early, shook Jeong-oh awake.

“It’s our princess’s birthday!”

Jeong-oh got up without even having time to wipe her eyes and hugged Yena.

“Happy birthday, Yena!”

“Thank you, Mom!”

Guk-soon, who was preparing breakfast in the kitchen, came into the room holding a gift box.

Yena waved her hands vigorously.

“No, that’s not it, Grandma!”

“Isn’t this it? Why not?”

“I’ll open it during the party later.”

It seemed like Yena already had the birthday party program sorted out in her head.

“What kind of grand party is our princess planning…?”

Guk-soon shrugged her shoulders in defeat and laughed.

The fragrant smell of seaweed soup filled the morning air.

Yena’s seventh birthday had come.

Yena wore a pink princess dress.

It was her favorite outfit, but she hadn’t worn it for weeks to make today special.

With the pink princess dress and a crown headband, Yena asked Jeong-oh to style her hair in curls, making Jeong-oh feel like a hairdresser.

“Now that your hair is done, you two look alike.”

Guk-soon, reminded of Jeong-oh’s childhood by Yena’s pretty appearance, smiled contentedly.

“Mom, you have to come home early today!”

Yena, holding Jeong-oh’s hand tightly, made her request. She had repeated this several times yesterday.

“Of course, I will.”

“It’s a promise!”

Jeong-oh pinky-swore with Yena.

Since she had overworked herself with late nights yesterday, today should go more smoothly. Jeong-oh waved goodbye to Yena, hoping for a perfect

day.

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Even the wind on the way to work felt refreshing.

It was a clear morning, as if everything in the world was celebrating Yena’s birthday.

Jeong-oh hesitated for a moment upon seeing Ji-heon standing like a statue in front of the company elevator but greeted him brightly.

“Hello, Director.”

“Yes.”

Despite his dry response, Jeong-oh smiled brightly.

Jeong Ji-heon.

Today is my child’s birthday.

So I hope you find happiness today, too.

Because you were here when my angel was born.

After getting off the elevator, Jeong-oh hummed a tune as she headed to her desk.

Inside the team, Gi-hun was sitting alone.

“Good morning, Gi-hun.”

“Hello, Assistant.”

With his greeting, Gi-hun leaned over the partition and slid something toward her. It was a small object wrapped in pink paper, about the size of a palm.

“What’s this?”

Gi-hun whispered to her, lowering his head deeply.

“I heard it’s your baby’s birthday.”

Ji-heon watched the scene quietly from behind.

Ch27 - Child's Birthday (2)

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Receiving Yena’s birthday gift from Gi-hun left Jeong-oh feeling dazed.

Just two days ago, she had revealed that she had a daughter to turn down his confession.

“It’s a hairpin.”

Seeing Jeong-oh’s face look burdened, Gi-hun whispered again that it was just a trivial gift.

Jeong-oh fidgeted with the gift in her hands, then cautiously smiled. She couldn’t reject this either.

A gift given with good intentions should be received with gratitude. Today is a good day, after all.

“Thank you. I’m sure she’ll love that a cool older brother gave it to her.”

“Older brother? More like uncle.”

Gi-hun’s expression showed no lingering regrets, which reassured Jeong-oh.

She put the gift in her bag and sat down at her desk. Gi-hun kept leaning over the partition to look at her.

“By the way, Assistant, you owe me a treat. You have to buy me dinner.”

“Of course. I’ll treat you to something substantial.”

Jeong-oh nodded with a fist pump of determination.

“Let’s work. I have to leave early today. I already told the team leader that I’ll be clocking out on time.”

“Leave all the hard work to me. I’ll make sure you get to leave on time today.”

“Alright. Thanks.”

Ji-heon, who had been watching the two from a distance, slowly opened and closed his fist.

A moment later, Jeong-oh made brief eye contact with Ji-heon, gave him a subtle nod, and turned her head away.

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“Mom, Mom, Mom!”

It was past 9 AM, but Dabin showed no signs of wanting to go to daycare.

“I want a tie! Tie!”

Dabin brought his only tie and waved it in front of Jin-seo’s face.

He seemed to think that his dad looked cool wearing a tie to work.

He had somehow managed to put on a shirt, but all the buttons were only half-fitted into their holes.

Jin-seo straightened Dabin’s clothes, properly buttoned his shirt, and finally adjusted his tie.

It was his girlfriend’s birthday.

Dabin, who had chosen a gift for Yena himself, wiped the ring box that his mom had beautifully wrapped with his palm over and over.

“But son, do you really think Yena will like the ring?”

“Yeah.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because the ring is pretty.”

“……Well, gifts reflect the giver’s feelings. Is it just the ring?”

“No! There’s also a letter!”

“Really? Let’s see it.”

Jin-seo took the note that Dabin proudly presented.

Her mouth dropped open at the message scrawled in uneven handwriting.

– Yena, your eyes are like jewels. Let’s get married later♥

Are you saying you want to get married just because her eyes resemble jewels?

She wanted to insert at least one more sentence between “jewels” and “marriage,” but seeing this pure confession through an adult’s perspective made it feel inappropriate.

It seemed like her son was planning to propose on Yena’s birthday.

Should I be cheering for you, son? We should at least consider Yena’s perspective, right?

“Is there anything else besides the ring and the letter?”

“Yeah! I have six talents!”

“Six talents?”

“Yeah. Three magic tricks, a poem about Yena, the dog-leg dance, and a tissue flower.”

This was serious.

It seemed that her son was planning to perform for his crush on her birthday.

Dabin, the reason I cheered for your clumsy magic shows is that I’m your mom…

The world can be harsh…

Maybe the proud Yena won’t like it at all…

When Dabin was wrapped up in his skirt, he believed he was the funniest person in the world.

Raising a child with high self-esteem was good, but it was a bit worrisome.

“What’s your poem about Yena?”

“Mom, call out Yena.”

“Yee.”

“Yena is.”

“Pretty.”

“Let’s.”

“Get married.”

……This is a problem.

“Son. Let’s just do the coin trick and the tissue flower. Just those two.”

“Why?”

“Because you should only show a little bit of your best tricks.”

“Then what about the poem? I worked hard on it!”

“……Okay. Then just the poem and the tissue flower.”

“Can’t I do three?”

“You’ll need something to perform at next year’s Yena’s birthday too.”

“Ah, then……”

Dabin suddenly started counting on his fingers one by one.

“Then I’ll have to prepare thirteen more, right?”

“Why thirteen?”

“Because I’ll be doing it for thirteen years.”

“Why thirteen years?”

“Because I’m going to get married when I turn twenty!”

“……So my son is going to get married at twenty.”

“Yeah!”

“But Dabin, after you get married, won’t you do your tricks anymore?”

“Yeah. Because I’ll have to take care of the baby, so I can’t. It’ll be hard.”

So my son knows it’s hard to raise a baby.

Is this really coming from someone who understands that?

If you know it’s hard, wouldn’t it be great if you listened to your mom, Dabin?

Jin-seo had a lot she wanted to say to her son, but she hid it all behind a quiet smile.

She just wanted to support him.

May her son’s first love be beautiful.

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Things were going smoothly.

Jeong-oh spent the entire morning in the meeting room working with Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob from the neighboring team to prepare a draft for the Daewon liquor production.

Since the script was the main focus of the draft, the copywriter Jeong-oh’s opinions were most reflected in it. It was a first proposal with a short preparation time, but Jeong-oh did her best.

After a quick lunch, she returned to the meeting room and was organizing the materials when her phone vibrated. It was a call from the Gwangjin Police Station.

Jeong-oh left the meeting room to answer the call.

“Hello.”

[Hello, this is Kwon Bae-il from the Gwangjin Police Station. Is this Lee Jeong-oh?] It was a voice she had heard a week ago. A pale-faced police officer with a kind demeanor was calling her directly. Jeong-oh responded pleasantly.

“Yes, that’s me.”

[I’m calling regarding your daughter’s case. Is it a good time to talk?] “Yes! Please go ahead.”

[We have checked all the nearby CCTV footage and confirmed a woman hurriedly walking while holding your daughter’s hand. However, we

couldn’t get a clear image of the woman. She was wearing a hat. I will send you the clearest video we have; could you check it?] “Yes, please.”

[I’ll send the video to the phone number I just called you from.] “Thank you.”

[Please contact us if you see anyone suspicious.] Bae-il ended the call and immediately sent the video file.

Jeong-oh carefully examined the video. She saw Yena walking briskly with a woman passing by a convenience store. The fear she had experienced before surged back into her heart. Goosebumps ran from the nape of her neck to the tips of her fingers.

Seeing her daughter being led away by a stranger sent chills through her body, even though the image was faint.

She calmed herself and replayed the video.

The woman, wearing dark clothing and a hat pulled low over her face, had her long hair tied to one side, but besides that, there were no specific distinguishing features. The image was dark enough that even the outline of her face was not clear, and she couldn’t identify the woman’s build.

‘First of all, I don’t know this person.’

Even so, she could conclude that this person was probably not someone she knew. Also, it couldn’t be Ji-heon’s mother.

‘But Ji-heon’s mother could have sent someone to approach her.’

There was no definitive evidence, which made the situation precarious. But it was incredibly important to Jeong-oh.

– It doesn’t seem like I know this person. Please contact me if any new evidence is discovered.

After sending a text message to Bae-il using the number he had provided, Jeong-oh returned to her office for a moment.

“Assistant, is everything alright? You don’t look so good.”

Gi-hun, who was observant, noticed Jeong-oh’s expression and asked.

“Gi-hun, I need to ask you something.”

Suddenly having a good idea, Jeong-oh changed her expression and showed Gi-hun several screenshots of the video she had received, focusing only on the woman’s hat.

“Have you seen a hat like this? It looks like a brand hat.”

Gi-hun squinted at the pictures for a while, tilting his head.

“I can’t tell for sure since the pictures are blurry. It looks like a hat from a foreign soccer team. Hold on a moment.”

Gi-hun went back to his desk and typed on the keyboard. Various baseball caps appeared in a row on Gi-hun’s PC monitor. After moving the mouse a few more times, he showed the search results to Jeong-oh.

“This one looks similar.”

It was a red cap with navy on the back, featuring the logo of a Spanish soccer team on the front. Jeong-oh’s complexion brightened as she examined the screenshot and the monitor back and forth.

“Oh wow! Gi-hun, you’re a genius!”

Jeong-oh’s voice rose with excitement.

“But there’s absolutely no guarantee that it’s the same. The picture is blurry, and hats like that can be made quite easily in knock-off versions. Just consider it a similar design.”

“Okay, I understand. But still, thank you so much, Gi-hun.”

“Not at all. I can help with more complicated tasks.”

Feeling reassured by Gi-hun’s response, Jeong-oh was able to push her worries aside and smile.

It was almost time to get off work.

She needed to finish up her tasks and get back to work.

Once she confirmed the proposal with Director Jeong Ji-heon, her work for the day would be done. She had already coordinated with Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob, so everything was almost settled.

Team 1 of the production department was in chaos because an existing advertiser had unexpectedly placed an order.

Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob waved at Jeong-oh as she passed by. It was a signal that things were getting busy, and she needed to handle the wrap-up herself. Jeong-oh nodded and headed for the meeting room.

If she was going to work alone, there was no need to be in the meeting room. Jeong-oh grabbed her laptop and returned to her desk.

In the meantime, Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob, who had been talking loudly on the phone, turned to Jeong-oh and said,

“Assistant Lee, let’s wrap up our Daewon liquor proposal first. Take the printed draft that Assistant Jo Si-nae will send over, paste it in, and then show it to the director.”

“Yes.”

Jeong-oh turned on her laptop and moved the mouse. But something was off.

The computer, which had been working fine before receiving the call from the police station… the computer…

“Assistant Lee, what’s wrong?”

“Just a moment.”

Jeong-oh swallowed hard and pressed the restart button on her laptop.

As the laptop screen came back on, an array of unknown characters filled the display.

"……Why is it doing this…?"

Jeong-oh stared at the bizarre screen with a pale face, continuing to move the mouse.

"Assistant Lee Jeong-oh, what's going on?"

Jo Si-nae, who was waiting to send files to Jeong-oh, rushed over to her desk.

"Is this a virus?"

Si-nae's voice drew everyone's attention to Jeong-oh.

Jeong-oh felt her fingertips tremble.

"It seems like Assistant Lee's laptop has a virus. Did you make a backup of your files?"

"Yes, I have the files."

It was saved in between, so she would need to put in some extra effort to finish it, but thankfully she had made a backup. Jeong-oh borrowed Gi-hun's computer and logged into the company cloud.

However, the files she had saved didn't appear.

Si-nae, who was watching, pressed further.

"What's going on? Didn't you save it to the cloud?"

"I'm sure I saved it here…"

"It's not there?"

“Assistant Lee, are you pretending like you didn’t back up anything from the beginning?”

Si-nae’s voice grew louder.

Cha Eun-bi, who had been working, stood up and approached.

“What’s going on?”

“Assistant Lee Jeong-oh’s laptop has a virus, and it seems she hasn’t backed up any of the materials made until now.”

After hearing Si-nae’s explanation, Eun-bi sighed deeply and scolded Jeong-oh.

“Assistant Jeong-oh, didn’t you once say you’d email me the work details separately? Yet you’ve never done it. You just talk big, and now look what’s happened.”

Jeong-oh had worked on the proposal with Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob, and since she didn’t need to ask Eun-bi for permission on that, she hadn’t sent a separate email. It was absurd to bring up that argument now.

Even Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob sighed in frustration.

“Ugh, I’m so busy, and nothing is going my way.”

Team Leader Seong Mi-ran was absent, leaving Jeong-oh alone to take the heat.

In the meantime, Ji-heon walked over from Production Team 2.

“What’s going on?”

Si-nae immediately reported.

“It seems that Assistant Jeong-oh accidentally deleted the final file for the Daewon liquor proposal. The whole team has been working hard on it until now, Director.”

Ch28 - Please

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Jeong-oh was taken aback by Jo Si-nae’s fabricated gossip.

From a distance, Eun-bi subtly lifted one corner of her lips.

Though she was angry, there was no point in rolling up her sleeves and fighting in this situation. It was more important to resolve the problem first.

Jeong-oh grabbed her laptop.

“I’ll go to the IT room and fix it quickly.”

“Let’s go together…”

“Let’s go together.”

Song Gi-hun rose from his seat, but Ji-heon interrupted him. Gi-hun, who had intended to go with Jeong-oh to the IT room, sat back down without finishing his sentence.

When Ji-heon expressed his intention to go himself, Si-nae looked at Eun-bi.

Eun-bi’s previously lifted lip quivered slightly. Clenching her fists so hard that her nails dug into her palms, she returned to her seat.

Jeong-oh hurriedly dashed away, with Ji-heon following closely behind in long strides. Their pace matched pretty well.

As Jeong-oh and Ji-heon entered the IT room, a few staff members who recognized Ji-heon stood up.

“Director, hello.”

Ji-heon nodded and got straight to the point.

“The computer isn’t working. I’d like it fixed.”

A staff member who received the laptop turned it on to check its status.

“When did this start happening?”

“It wasn’t long ago. It happened while I was away for about 30 minutes.”

After examining the laptop screen for a while and pressing various buttons, the staff member’s expression gradually darkened.

“Is there any data that you absolutely need to recover?”

“Yes. There’s a file that I really need.”

Jeong-oh answered.

“It looks like it’s a virus. If we need to recover the files instead of wiping the laptop completely, it’s going to take some time. I’ll have it restored by next Wednesday.”

Jeong-oh felt her heart sink at the staff member’s response.

Ji-heon asked, “I urgently need that data. Is there no way to do it faster?”

“It’s likely to take at least a day and a half…”

“I’d like it resolved today.”

“……I’ll try my best.”

Under Ji-heon’s pressure, the staff member nodded with an awkward expression.

Seeing the staff member’s expression, Jeong-oh felt hopeless. She sensed that the working files wouldn’t be restored by the end of the day.

As they left the IT room, Jeong-oh said to Ji-heon, “I’ll recreate it from memory and report back.”

“That sounds better. Can you do it by six o’clock?”

Ji-heon asked blankly.

“Yes, I can.”

“Then we’ll set it for a report at six.”

The unexpected incident made Jeong-oh’s schedule hectic.

As she returned to her desk after parting ways with Ji-heon, Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob rushed over.

“Assistant Lee Jeong-oh. What did the IT team say? Are they going to restore it right away?”

“No. It seems it’s going to take time, so I’m going to remake the materials.”

“You’re going to recreate all of it?”

“I think I can do it since I remember it to some extent.”

Eun-bi interjected with a worried tone, “Copywriting is about the nuances of words; can you really recreate the original feeling just from memory?”

Though her tone was concerned, it carried an edge. It seemed she was convinced that Jeong-oh would fail.

Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob encouraged her.

“Well, let’s give it a try. Since it’s only the first proposal, we’ll have to put in the effort again. We can take our time reviewing it later, so let’s just focus on submitting it today. You can do this, right?”

“Yes, I’ll give it a shot.”

“I have another urgent matter to deal with right now, so I’ll be stepping away for a bit. I’ll be back later, so please take care of it in the meantime. Call me if you hit a snag!”

“Sure. I understand.”

The current time was 2 PM.

There were four hours left until the report at 6 PM.

While she couldn’t leave work at six on the dot, she could manage to leave by seven.

‘That should be enough.’

Jeong-oh felt a surge of determination.

The production team members were so busy that Jeong-oh couldn’t ask for any help. Eun-bi was working hard on something with the new copywriter from Production Team 1 beside her.

Jeong-oh continued to doubt whether they were truly working or just pretending to be busy, but she didn’t want to voice her disappointment.

At 5:30 PM, Jeong-oh barely completed the proposal.

It wasn’t exactly the same as the original proposal. She filled in some parts that she couldn’t quite remember with alternatives. Jeong-oh sent the completed proposal to her teammates via email.

After reviewing the proposal, Eun-bi leaned on her desk and asked, “Assistant Lee Jeong-oh, this is completely different from the copy I wrote. Are you sure you remember correctly?”

“Then could you please correct the parts that are different from your memory and send them to me via email?”

“I gave you notes a long time ago. What happened to all of that?”

“I know it’s somewhere. However, I don’t have time to look for it right now. For now, please review the material and correct it. Later, I’ll check how accurate your memory is by finding those notes.”

When Jeong-oh pointed out her memory, Eun-bi flinched and made an excuse.

“I don’t have time either, so I think it’s better for you to handle it. Since this happened due to your mistake, it would be meaningful for you to take responsibility and report it. I’ll support you.”

Eun-bi settled the dispute by deflecting responsibility.

Afterward, Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob from Production Team 1, who was out for a while, contacted her. Jeong-oh was to report the proposal directly to Ji-heon.

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At exactly 6 PM.

Ji-heon said he would come to the conference room himself, so while waiting with the AE, Jeong-oh received a call from Guk-soon.

Stepping out of the conference room, Jeong-oh answered the call.

“Hello.”

[Mom!] Yena’s cute voice came through. Yena was calling from Guk-soon’s mobile phone. Despite her tension due to the proposal report, Jeong-oh couldn’t help but smile.

[Did Mom get off work? When are you coming?] “I haven’t left work yet.”

[Why? Why haven’t you left yet?] Hearing Yena’s sulky voice made Jeong-oh’s heart ache.

However, she couldn’t show it too much since she was near the conference room. She was anxious that Ji-heon might come over.

“I’m busy with work. But I’ll finish soon and come home. I’ll call you when I’m leaving.”

[Okay. Hurry up! You remember our promise, right?] “Of course, I remember. I’ll get there as fast as I can.”

Carefully soothing Yena, Jeong-oh hung up the phone and noticed Ji-heon approaching.

It felt like Ji-heon was staring at her intently. Jeong-oh nodded in greeting and entered the conference room first.

After Jeong-oh entered, Ji-heon followed, and then the members of Production Team 1 came in one after another. It seemed they thought they needed to make an impression during the report.

The responsible AE handed Ji-heon a printed copy of the proposal.

“Shall we begin the presentation?”

“I’ll take a look myself.”

Ji-heon replied briefly to the AE’s question and turned to the first page of the proposal.

The conference room quickly fell silent.

Occasionally, there was the sound of pages turning, and when it stopped, Ji-heon tilted his head, causing the team members to shrink back.

After reviewing the last page, Ji-heon set the proposal down.

“The planning section is concise and clear. The problem is with the production section.”

The employees swallowed nervously, their faces tense.

“It would be unreasonable to come up with better ideas here, right? If the meeting drags on, it’ll be harder to gather opinions.”

Ji-heon’s question, which was somewhat obvious, left everyone speechless. Since both the team leaders of Production Teams 1 and 2 were absent, there was no one to stand up to Ji-heon.

“Well then, Assistant Lee Jeong-oh.”

“Yes.”

“Please recreate it and show me again today. The rest can go about their tasks.”

Jeong-oh’s face went pale at the sudden directive.

“Director, are you saying…”

“I think we need to completely overhaul it.”

“…….”

“I will need to review everything from the beginning.”

As Ji-heon stood up, he spoke.

The others secretly let out a sigh of relief for not being scolded separately.

Gi-hoon, who had been caught by Ji-heon a few days ago and had worked in the director’s office, looked at Ji-heon with a gloomy expression.

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Jeong-oh followed Ji-heon as he left the conference room.

“Director, could you please tell me which parts need to be revised first?”

“The copy is strange. There’s no sincerity in it at all.”

“Which specific parts of the copy seem insincere to you?”

“All of it.”

“…….”

“I think we need to redo all of it.”

No way…

Jeong-oh felt both unfair and desperate at Ji-heon’s harsh words.

Jeong-oh continued to chase after Ji-heon. Once they reached the corridor leading to the office and there was no one left around, she called out to him again.

“Director, can I work from home today? I’ll revise the proposal as quickly as possible and send it to you by email today.”

“Is there something urgent at home?”

“Yes, I have some household matters to attend to.”

“What kind of household matters?”

Jeong-oh hesitated to answer Ji-heon’s follow-up question.

She knew from the previous day that Ji-heon had been particularly harsh with Assistant Jo Si-nae after Si-nae had postponed client entertaining tasks.

If she mentioned it was her father’s memorial day, he might ask for a death certificate, and if she said her mother was sick, he might want a hospital diagnosis.

“……Just some household matters.”

“Is it something you can’t talk about?”

“…….”

“If it’s such an urgent household matter, can you really get your work done? I know that when you go home, you don’t even check your phone.”

“No, this time I will definitely…….”

“Don’t you think instead of pleading your case, you should just start working and finish quickly?”

As Ji-heon turned to leave, Jeong-oh, feeling anxious, grabbed his sleeve.

“Director, can I at least go out for just three hours, or no, just two hours? I promise I’ll be back in two hours. Please…….”

“Are you telling me to wait here for two hours until your household matters are finished?”

However, Ji-heon remained unmoved.

“You have to take responsibility for the work you volunteered for. Don’t you think so?”

With Ji-heon’s reprimand, Jeong-oh had no choice but to stay silent.

“I’m instructing you because I believe you are responsible for this task. If it’s really impossible, I’ll call Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob. You can work with him instead.”

Ji-heon pulled his arm away from Jeong-oh’s grasp and went into his office.

In a hurry, Jeong-oh contacted Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob. However, he didn’t answer.

Returning to her desk, she noticed Eun-bi glaring at her. But this wasn’t a time to care about that. Jeong-oh ran to Eun-bi.

“Manager, I’m sorry, but could I ask for a favor? I have some work today. Could you please handle the revision of the proposal? I’m begging you.”

It was a request she would never normally make. A request she might regret later. But Jeong-oh threw her pride aside. She was that desperate.

If Eun-bi helped her this one time, she silently swore that she would never go against her again in the future.

“What did you say? Ha! This is unbelievable.”

But the response she received was cold.

Eun-bi raised her voice as if she had been put in a ridiculous situation. People around them turned to look.

“Why should I clean up after this mess that you created? Don’t you think that’s too much?”

Jeong-oh quickly realized the reality.

Right. I’ve been foolish.

Chae Eun-bi was not someone who would help her with such a request. In her desperation, she had reached out with a rotten lifeline.

Jeong-oh quickly gave up and returned to her desk.

Gi-hoon, who knew all about Jeong-oh’s situation, was reporting this fact to Mi-ran, who was outside, asking for help.

“If the team leader comes back, I think the problem will be resolved more quickly…….”

Seeing how he was trying his best to get Jeong-oh off work, her eyes turned red.

After finishing the call with Mi-ran, Gi-hoon said to Jeong-oh.

“I’m so sorry I can’t help you, Assistant. I wish I were a copywriter instead.”

“It’s okay. Thank you for worrying about me.”

At that moment, Ji-heon’s voice could be heard in the hallway.

“Assistant Lee Jeong-oh.”

“Sure.”

Jeong-oh stood up.

“Bring your work laptop and come to the conference room. Let’s work on it together.”

At Ji-heon’s instruction, Eun-bi’s eyes widened in surprise.

…Are they really going to be alone in the conference room together?

Ch29 - I Will Cry

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– Mom, I have something to take care of, so I'll be a few hours late. Please take good care of Yena for me. I'm sorry.

After sending the text message to Guk-soon, Jeong-oh hugged her newly issued laptop and headed to the conference room.

Ji-heon was sitting with his chin propped up, his laptop open in front of him. When Jeong-oh entered, he gestured to the seat next to him.

As Jeong-oh placed her laptop beside Ji-heon and plugged in the power cord, he spoke leisurely.

"We have a deadline, and it's tomorrow. It's basic to clear personal schedules the day before a deadline at an advertising company."

"Yeah."

Having already given up on leaving work on time, she didn't want to hear any more of his criticisms. She coldly brushed off his nagging, but his voice continued.

"If you don't finish your work, I can't leave either. If you write the script, I need to review it carefully and give you feedback."

"……."

"Our goal is to finish by nine o'clock, so let's hurry up. I'll drop you off at home once we're done."

There was no way to see his intent to both give and take. Jeong-oh remained silent and placed her hands on the keyboard.

She knew his point about taking responsibility for her work was valid, but the harsh reality made her want to cry.

Once upon a time, he was the person who listened to everything she had to say.

Now, this man didn’t even flinch at her desperate requests.

Admit it.

Jeong-oh. It’s time to let go of your lingering feelings.

He is no longer that Jeong Ji-heon from seven years ago. He’s a completely different person now.

Jeong-oh bit her lip and held back her tears.

As she restrained herself, her nose began to tingle with the urge to sneeze. Jeong-oh sniffled quietly.

He turned his head and stared at her intently. Not wanting to show her face, Jeong-oh also turned away. Ji-heon’s gaze became more persistent.

“Are you crying right now?”

“No.”

“A professional copywriter shouldn’t be crying just because of a little overtime.”

“I’m not crying.”

In response to Ji-heon’s teasing, Jeong-oh’s fingers on the keyboard became more aggressive.

Ji-heon relaxedly watched Jeong-oh, who was immersed in her work without even glancing at him.

He had just received a call from Team Leader Seong Mi-ran. She had asked him to consider Jeong-oh's situation, and he had replied that he would try to finish early so she could leave work.

Thanks to the unexpected problem, he found himself able to keep her nearby. Even without a laptop virus, he had every intention of holding on to her.

Earlier that morning, he had overheard her talking with Song Gi-hoon. Gi-hoon was trying to win her over by giving her a small gift.

"Leave all the hard work to me. I'll make sure you can leave work on time today."

Watching the two of them rely on each other was very annoying to Ji-heon.

And then, at exactly 6 PM, Ji-heon entered the conference room to receive a report and accidentally overheard Jeong-oh on the phone.

"I have a lot of work to do. But I'll finish up soon and head home. I'll call you on my way out. You know, I'll be there quickly."

A voice that sounded excited about something waiting for her. A cheerful, very friendly tone.

The fact that someone who had caused such serious problems was talking with such a bright voice and counting down the minutes until quitting time felt a little irritating.

And here she was, laughing and whispering as if sharing a secret. Now she was making excuses about home chores when asked to redo the proposal.

Did he really think she would naively fall for such excuses?

Ji-heon stifled a laugh, finding her justifications amusing.

In the meantime, she mentioned she would be away for two or three hours.

If that were the case, Ji-heon couldn’t let her go for those two or three hours.

She was still completely focused on her work, showing no signs of emotion.

Her attempts not to look at him were quite endearing.

Ji-heon felt a tingling sensation in his fingertips.

The heat radiating from her, sitting right next to him, was tormenting him.

He wanted to brush her hair aside to see her profile more clearly.

He wanted to inhale her scent and even lick her flushed cheeks.

Ji-heon was engulfed in such base desires that he could hardly believe how he had managed to live until now.

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Eun-bi eventually stood up.

In the conference room were Jeong Ji-heon and Lee Jeong-oh, alone together…

If she had known this would happen, she would have agreed to Jeong-oh’s request. She would have said she would finish the proposal.

The realization that her refusal of Jeong-oh’s request had led to the two being alone together made her feel uneasy.

She cautiously walked toward the conference room.

Somehow, she felt she had to see the two of them together with her own eyes.

The door to the conference room was probably closed, but since it had small glass windows, she could peek inside.

There were five conference rooms lined up.

One of them must have the two of them in it…

Two of the conference rooms were empty, and two were in the midst of a competitive presentation meeting.

Before she knew it, Eun-bi had arrived at the door of the last conference room.

The smallest room.

Her legs trembled as she slowly approached.

Inside the conference room was quiet, so she had to tread as lightly as possible.

What was so wrong with peeking into a conference room through a glass window that she felt so anxious?

Eun-bi thought it was silly to feel this way and slowly brought her eyes to the glass.

And then, she saw the truth she didn’t want to know…

The two of them were sitting side by side.

And the look in Jeong Ji-heon’s eyes as he gazed at Lee Jeong-oh.

Without realizing it, Eun-bi raised a hand to cover her mouth.

…How can someone’s gaze change like that?

It was an obvious look, as if nothing else in his world mattered except her.

Despite a gentle smile lingering on his lips, there was a chilling hunger and craving that made her skin crawl.

Even from a distance, just watching through the glass window felt suffocating, as if she was peeking into someone's private life, as if she was witnessing a secret act.

Her heart raced wildly, overwhelmed by a sense of bewildering defeat, her face flushed and tears welling up.

Jeong Ji-heon had never looked at her that way.

Not even once.

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8:50 PM.

Although he sometimes worked late into the night, three hours of overtime didn't feel like much today.

"If I take a taxi and go quickly… it might take about 20 minutes?"

Jeong-oh checked the time and sighed.

His goal was to arrive home by 9:30 PM.

While it was late for a child who usually went to bed early, the birthday celebration wasn't over yet.

Yena, wait for me. Mommy will be there soon.

"I can assure you, there won't be a better copy than this. This is the best that can come from my head."

Jeong-oh presented the revised proposal to Ji-heon, incorporating as much of his feedback as possible.

After carefully reading through it, Ji-heon nodded.

“Alright. Good job.”

“Yes.”

As soon as Jeong-oh received Ji-heon’s confirmation, she hurriedly organized her things. Ji-heon stood up and left the conference room, saying,

“Pack your bag and come down. I’ll give you a ride home.”

Jeong-oh secretly snorted at the back of Ji-heon’s head.

Ji-heon returned to his office and put on his jacket.

He placed the newly received proposal on his desk but picked it up again and put it in his bag.

Although he said he would take her home, he felt that she might be hesitating for some reason.

Thinking that he needed to move together with her, he rushed outside and stood guard in front of the elevator.

However, Jeong-oh didn’t appear even after ten minutes had passed.

He stopped by her desk, but seeing that she was nowhere to be found, he decided to call her.

After a long wait, she finally answered the phone.

[Hello?] “Where are you?”

[I’m outside.] Her cold response furrowed his brow. He felt she was lying.

“You’re outside while I’m standing in front of the elevator?”

[I went down the stairs.] Ji-heon gritted his teeth and said.

“I told you I’d take you home.”

[I don’t want to.] “……”

[Do I have to stay next to you until I get home? It’s not even work.] “……”

[See you tomorrow.] The call abruptly ended.

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Goal! 9:30 PM!

The sound of the front door opening made Yena rush over.

“Mom!”

“Princess!”

Jeong-oh lifted Yena into her arms. The child, who had greeted her mother cheerfully, soon contorted her face.

“Mom, why did you come home so late?!”

Waaah!

Her sorrow exploded.

“I’m sorry, Yena. I’m really sorry.”

Jeong-oh hugged Yena tightly, soothing her.

“I waited for you at the restaurant!”

“Ah, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Let’s have the party quickly! Party!”

“The party was at the restaurant!”

Guk-soon approached and said.

“Dobin, Doyun, and Dobin’s mom came, and we sang songs and ate cake at the restaurant.”

Guk-soon’s explanation made Yena cry even harder.

“I wanted to do it with Mom!”

“Then let’s do it again together! Doesn’t that sound good? Isn’t that okay?”

Jeong-oh quickly ran out to buy a cake. It wasn’t difficult since there was a bakery right in front of their house.

Yena ended up having her birthday party twice in one day.

“Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday dear Yena, happy birthday to you!”

As Jeong-oh sang, Yena smiled with tears in her eyes. Although Jeong-oh couldn’t come home early, Yena still got what she had wished for.

After opening the present that Gi-hun had given her and unwrapping a gift that she had bought a long time ago but hadn’t opened, she transformed back into her lively and cheerful self.

“Mom, I got a present from Dobin too. Isn’t it pretty?”

After her mood improved, Yena showed off the present she received from Dobin with sparkling hands.

On her left hand, she wore a ring with a red heart-shaped cubic zirconia.

“Did Dobin give you a ring?”

“Yeah. And he showed me magic tricks and the dog leg dance too.”

“Oh, sounds like Yena had fun.”

“Yeah. He said he also prepared a poem and a letter, but he’ll give those to me next year.”

It seemed that Dobin had performed three magic tricks and the dog leg dance to cheer up Yena when she burst into tears, saying that her mom

hadn’t come.

After finally calming her down, he had ended up looking sad himself, leaving behind a strange comment about having nothing to do for the next four years.

Excitedly sharing the day’s events, Yena suddenly blinked her eyes. Before she knew it, it was already past 10 o’clock.

“Mom, I’m sleepy. I want to sleep.”

“Okay. Let’s go to bed. Mom will hug you.”

Soon, a blanket was spread on the bed, and Yena and Jeong-oh lay down side by side. Yena must have been very tired, as she fell asleep immediately.

As she gently patted Yena, Jeong-oh gazed at her for a long time after she fell asleep and placed soft kisses all over Yena’s delicate skin.

The meaningful day came to an end.

Guk-soon, after visiting her daughter, who must have been especially exhausted from the day, opened the door and couldn’t help but smile at the sight of her.

Look at her showering the sleeping child with kisses.

Is it really that great?

“Can’t you even let her sleep?”

“Yep.”

“Is she really that pretty even after seeing her every day?”

“Of course. Absolutely.”

Guk-soon looked at her daughter with affection.

I think you’re so beautiful.

The most beautiful thing I’ve made.

I gave birth to you, but you’re more precious than I am.

Just as you love your daughter, I love you.

To me, whether you’re thirty or forty, you’re still my little girl, my princess, whom I must protect and love even more.

You’re a child I would want to protect with my life, yet these days, it seems you’re struggling in ways I can’t reach, which constantly weighs on my mind.

Just reading a single line from the hurried text message is enough to tell. She must have overdone it while being extremely busy today. All to keep the promise she made with her daughter.

The dark expression of my daughter I caught glimpses of while celebrating Yena’s birthday made my heart ache.

“Jeong-oh.”

“Yeah?”

“If it’s too hard, just quit. Can’t I take care of you?”

“It’s not just me. We have Yena too.”

Jeong-oh replied lightly, almost joking.

My thirty-year-old child, who still seems like a child even after having a baby.

I hope your world is warm and safe.

May you not be hurt by the harsh storms of life.

As a mother, I can only pray desperately in my heart.

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After finishing his shower, Ji-heon picked up a can of beer and sat down on the sofa.

In front of him lay the proposal he had brought from the office.

Assistant Lee Jeong-oh had made him a bit upset with her antics.

Sighing, Ji-heon picked it up as he stared at the proposal.

A phrase written by Jeong-oh as a copy candidate under the main script draft caught his eye.

– A boss like a rainbow.

Next to it was a cheerful drawing of a rainbow, but Ji-heon understood the underlying meaning perfectly.

He couldn’t help but smile at her audacious outburst.

The more she did this, the more he wanted to keep her around.

After taking a sip of beer, he flipped through a few more pages.

Then, he reached a different sentence she had added, causing him to stop.

Without even knowing why, he gazed at it silently before moving his hand to trace the words.

Before he realized it, his smile had completely faded.

The neatly printed letters somehow felt disordered.

Leaving both the beer and the proposal on the table, Ji-heon stood up.

He felt that no matter what he poured into his wide-open chest, it wouldn’t fill the void.

A night breeze slipped through the partially open window, causing the top page of the proposal to flutter like a dragonfly wing.

– You who have forgotten me.

Longing for what has been forgotten will bring tears.

There are many meanings hidden within things that cannot be expressed in words.

Ch30 - Even if you give everything you have

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A day passed, and then another, and another, and another.

After Ye-na’s birthday, the weekend passed, and Monday came again.

Fortunately, the first proposal sent to Dawon Spirits last Friday returned with a positive response. They requested that a storyboard be prepared based on the first proposal and asked for product packaging samples.

On the previous day, Jeong-oh, who had worked hard, received comfort from Mi-ran. If Mi-ran hadn’t calmed her down on Friday, Jeong-oh might have seriously considered storming out of the company.

Jeong-oh’s laptop, which had been infected with a virus, was also returned. She had expected to get it back on Wednesday but received it on Monday instead. It seemed the employee rushed it back due to Ji-heon’s special request.

“It seems it wasn’t just bad luck; someone must have planted the virus,” the IT staff confessed.

Jeong-oh had suspected something similar. It was strange that a computer issued shortly after her hiring had become severely infected with a virus.

Regardless, she was relieved that the laptop was fixed since it contained not only materials for Dawon Spirits but also materials for the competing PT. The IT staff shook their head, saying it was a very difficult job and that they didn’t want to experience it again.

After working late on Thursday, Jeong-oh hadn’t had a chance to face Ji-heon. Even though she came to the office over the weekend, she couldn’t see him.

While it was comforting not to face him because she hated him so much, there was also a part of her that wanted to confront him and argue.

On the other hand, she was a bit worried about him. Was he okay? Did he have any problems?

While working late on Ye-na’s birthday, Jeong-oh muttered various curses under her breath because she hated him so much.

She hoped he would suffer for three days straight, starving until he finally got up out of hunger, only to find there wasn’t a drop of water in the house. She wanted him to be so exhausted from going out for water that he would have to call his friends, only to find they were all out having fun.

Since she had put a lot of sincerity into her curses, she wondered if they had truly worked.

But apparently, that wasn’t the case. He came to work this morning looking fine and seemed to be working quite diligently.

Several people from Division 1 were summoned to Ji-heon’s office to receive different tasks. Some left the office feeling good, while others trudged out like they had lost their souls.

One of those was Jeong-oh’s team member, Song Gi-hoon.

“Assistant, I want to die…”

Gi-hoon gazed blankly at the paper he had received from the office, letting out a deep sigh.

“Why? Why? Why?”

“What the hell is this?”

Gi-hoon handed Jeong-oh the paper he was holding.

“Director Jeong showed me that I should do it this way… but I have no idea what this is.”

It seemed to be a promotional webtoon for a home camera brand that Gi-hoon was in charge of.

What on earth did this man do to the paper…?

As Jeong-oh closely examined the drawing, her expression soured.

“What is this? Who drew this?”

“This isn’t just a bad drawing. It’s a horrible one.”

Jeong-oh candidly expressed her opinion, and Gi-hoon openly lamented his feelings.

Jeong-oh stared intently at the bizarre drawing.

Ji-heon, did you draw a dog or a bird…?

If you can’t draw, then don’t. Why do you have to mess things up and make the employees suffer…?

“I wondered why Ye-na drew such imaginary animals; it must run in the genes.”

Somehow, the thought of Ye-na’s art grades ten years from now made Jeong-oh even more frustrated and angry.

Team Leader Mi-ran, who approached to see what was wrong, couldn’t help but chuckle.

“You can’t laugh, Team Leader. I’m serious here.”

“Oh, Gi-hoon, I’m sorry. It seems the Director has insight, but his drawing skills are completely lacking.”

“So should I use this as a reference to draw a dog or a bird?” Gi-hoon asked, causing the team members who were laughing to fall silent.

After pondering for a moment, Jeong-oh stepped up.

“Leave it to me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to paint over it exactly the same.”

“… Paint over it?”

“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. If he drew a dog, then I’ll draw a dog.”

Just wait and see, Jeong Ji-heon.

She wanted to seize the opportunity for revenge.

Jeong-oh looked at Mi-ran, who sighed and nodded. It was a sign that she would trust Jeong-oh.

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After a boring weekend, Monday arrived. After receiving the weekly work report at a team leader meeting presided over by the department head, Ji-heon called a few employees in for assignments.

Up until a month ago, both work and life had felt dull, but since being assigned to Max Planning, he felt like he was finding some enjoyment in his work.

However, his mood, which had been off since Thursday night, hadn’t improved.

After offering to give a ride to Jeong-oh, who had become irritable due to working late, Ji-heon had tried to find another opportunity to talk to her, but he had failed.

He still hadn’t managed to give Jeong-oh the things he bought on Friday to cheer her up.

Jeong-oh continued to be absent from her desk, and she was always with someone else. The most annoying of those was, of course, Song Gi-hoon.

After reviewing Gi-hoon’s work, Ji-heon called him to his office to assign him some tasks. Although Gi-hoon would be busy, the work itself was engaging enough that they would both want to take it on, so Ji-heon thought Gi-hoon would be satisfied.

However, despite having assigned work to Gi-hoon, when it was time for the evening report, Jeong-oh and Ko Eun-joo, both from Production Team 2, followed closely behind Gi-hoon as he entered.

It was bothersome that Jeong-oh was sticking so close to Gi-hoon, but at least he was glad to see her face again.

“I assigned work to Song Gi-hoon, didn’t I?”

“Yes. We came to help Gi-hoon with his concerns, so we wanted to explain together,” Jeong-oh said cheerfully.

Is she trying to protect Song Gi-hoon from getting in trouble?

Ji-heon looked at the three of them with suspicion.

Ko Eun-joo placed a tablet PC on Ji-heon’s desk.

The three of them were moving closely together, looking like they were in some sort of relay race, which was quite amusing.

“The Director’s insight was so groundbreaking that we decided to use it as is,” Jeong-oh opened the conversation.

“What insight are you referring to?” Ji-heon asked.

“This one,” Jeong-oh pointed at the character that appeared on the screen.

Curious about what it was, Ji-heon squinted and brought his face closer to the screen.

It was the dog Gi-hoon had drawn that morning.

They had copied and pasted the drawing and brought it as is.

“Since it’s unclear whether the character is a dog or a bird, I’ll call it ‘dogbird’ for now,” Jeong-oh declared.

At that moment, Ji-heon understood why the three had come together.

Jeong-oh had brought the other team members along to tease him.

As Jeong-oh explained about the promotional webtoon, Ko Eun-joo’s previously serious expression transformed several times, unable to suppress her laughter.

Gi-hoon was trembling at the corners of his lips, looking nervous as if he was afraid of Ji-heon’s reaction despite finding Jeong-oh’s explanation hilarious.

Jeong-oh was acting very shamelessly. She had looked so angry on Thursday, but now she was displaying a variety of expressions like a traditional Korean performer.

Ji-heon knew he was being teased, yet he found it quite amusing. Instead of focusing on the webtoon, he couldn’t help but watch Jeong-oh’s mouth as she spoke.

“The webtoon is well done, but is Jeong-oh trying to mess with me right now?”

After listening to the thorough explanation, he asked with a cold smile. Since they had initiated the teasing, he felt justified throwing a straight line back at them.

However, Jeong-oh was unfazed. She asked in a completely nonchalant tone, “Huh…? What do you mean, Director?”

She was being utterly shameless. Her expression of feigned confusion was excellent.

“You must have incited Gi-hoon to bring that drawing I made to me, right?” Ji-heon pressed.

“To be honest, I had no choice. I really couldn’t tell if it was a dog or a bird,” Jeong-oh continued shamelessly.

“Please let me know, Director. Then I’ll make corrections. Was it a dog or a bird?”

“…”

“Did you draw a dog or a bird?”

“…”

“Or is it just an imaginary animal?”

Puh.

Ko Eun-joo couldn’t hold back her laughter and burst out.

“Dog.”

Ji-heon glared at Jeong-oh and replied, “Ah, dog. Understood. Dog.”

Jeong-oh nodded vigorously, as if she had gained some profound insight.

Ji-heon turned to look at Eun-joo.

“Ko Eun-joo, are you done laughing?”

“Oops. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I should be the one apologizing for drawing poorly. But thanks to you, I had a really good time.”

The trio was surprised by Ji-heon’s unexpected reaction.

With an eerily soft smile, Ji-heon stood up from his seat.

“Song Gi-hoon, please modify the character and contact the artist, and Jeong-oh, stay here for a moment.”

The trio was once again taken aback.

Just before entering the office, Jeong-oh, Gi-hoon, and Eun-joo had formed an alliance to avoid being alone with Ji-heon.

If Gi-hoon was called, Jeong-oh and Eun-joo would follow; if Jeong-oh was called, Gi-hoon and Eun-joo would follow.

They had made that promise, but now, right after meeting Ji-heon, an unexpected situation had occurred.

Gi-hoon and Eun-joo couldn’t move from their seats.

Ji-heon had specifically chosen to keep Jeong-oh behind, putting them in an awkward position.

“But what about the assistant…?”

Gi-hoon looked at Ji-heon, unable to finish his sentence.

Reluctantly, Jeong-oh had to send the two away like a grown-up.

“You guys go ahead. Ko Eun-joo, Gi-hoon.”

Ji-heon watched with misty eyes as the three had a tearful farewell. After Eun-joo and Gi-hoon left, Ji-heon gestured for Jeong-oh to sit.

“Sit over there.”

Jeong-oh sulkily took her seat.

Ji-heon didn’t sit directly across from her; instead, he turned around and brought over a box that was sitting next to the desk.

Once again, it was something large.

Ji-heon opened the box in front of Jeong-oh.

What the heck is all this…?

Jeong-oh’s mouth slightly dropped open at the colorful assortment inside the box.

It was a bundle of beautifully packaged cookies and chocolates.

Jeong-oh’s expression soured as she was taken aback.

“If you’re going to throw away food, just call me,” she recalled a comment she had made off the cuff before.

“I told you to call me if you’re going to throw away something edible,” she had said to him once.

“…So are you saying you’re going to throw this away now?”

“Seems like it, so take it.”

Jeong-oh let out a shallow laugh.

It was amusing to see him lay out things he had clearly bought and then explain that he was “throwing them away.”

Is this how he apologizes?

Does he have even a little remorse?

She looked at him over the cookies, but she couldn’t read any expression of regret on his face.

Instead, he looked at her with an arrogant gaze as if to say, “I’m giving you this to cheer you up.”

Jeong-oh shot back, “No, thanks. My mind has changed. Since you were going to throw it away anyway, just do it.”

“Then you can throw it away. I’m just doing what you asked me to.”

“I don’t want that either. I’m getting up now.”

Jeong-oh stood up immediately.

Ji-heon crossed his arms and watched her.

This woman is still sulking.

He read the lingering resentment she had.

“Are you really that displeased about having to work late once?”

“Of course.”

“Everyone works late like that.”

“I specifically asked you for it. Very earnestly. I said I needed to go home that day. I even said I’d come back two hours later if it was absolutely impossible.”

Jeong-oh felt as if she had returned to that earnest moment.

Once again, she felt unjustly treated, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“So, what kind of family issue was it? I need to know that to understand your feelings better.”

It was your daughter’s birthday!

I couldn’t scream; it felt like I had swallowed a rock, and my insides were tight.

“If I talk about that, you’ll arbitrarily judge the importance of that family matter, right? Even if it’s incredibly important to me, you might think otherwise,” she retorted boldly.

Ji-heon also stood up from his seat.

The distance between them was closing. Jeong-oh flinched but didn’t step back.

“If you’re feeling uneasy about what’s happened so far, you need to apologize directly, not bombard me with cookies.”

“What should I apologize for?”

Had I unnecessarily brought up the word “apologize”? He seemed completely clueless.

But now that I had brought it up, there was no turning back. Jeong-oh honestly expressed her disappointment in him.

“Last Thursday, you pretended to be my dad in front of the convenience store. And the Thursday before that, you made me work late while sitting next to me.”

“Last Thursday was your fault for being deceived. The Thursday before that was just me doing what a superior is supposed to do. The agreement on overtime pay was already made when you signed the salary contract. So why should I apologize for that?”

“Because I was deceived. And I begged you earnestly, but you completely ignored me. You made me feel emotions I shouldn’t have had because of you.”

Someday, I might regret saying this.

But I need to say what I have to say. I have my dignity.

“Why would you mimic my deceased father? That’s not something you should joke about. And regarding working late, usually, I would too. It’s my

responsibility, so of course, I would stay up all night to sort it out. But that time, I begged you desperately. It was something that could be done at home, and you could have received it via email. I even said I would come back two hours later if it was absolutely impossible.”

Of course, he was just doing his job as the department head. I know that.

But he didn’t make any effort to consider the position of his employee. He could have thought of alternatives together, but he only forced the answer he had provided.

That’s not acceptable.

“And, having you stand right next to me while working decreases my efficiency. If you hadn’t been there, I would have finished the work from last Thursday much faster.”

“…”

“So, if you apologize, I’ll accept it.”

“What if I can’t?”

He retorted coldly, shamelessly.

His expression didn’t falter at all.

A hollow laugh escaped Jeong-oh’s lips as she confronted his arrogant pride.

“If you can’t, then you simply don’t have to.”

In the end, Jeong-oh also decided to let go.

If he couldn’t understand what he needed to apologize for after I directly pointed it out, then she would have to give up.

On Ji-heon.

“You might regret this a little later, but I don’t think not apologizing now will affect you in any way.”

If I give up, I’ll feel better too.

A little lighter.

With newfound courage, Jeong-oh stepped closer to Ji-heon and spoke in a lower voice.

“Do you think what you have is incredibly great?”

“…”

“Even if you gave me everything you have, I wouldn’t trade it for my everything.”

My everything.

Thinking of Ye-na and my family made my nose tingle.

Because of you, I decided to continue working at this company, so if I give up on you, I don’t need to be here anymore.

If you’re that kind of person, I can’t let Ye-na see you.

I can’t let Ye-na get hurt by meeting you.

I want my daughter’s world to be warm.

“Let’s just quit.”

At her declaration, his eyes widened in surprise.

“I’ll throw everything away. This damned company.”

“…”

“The moment I walk out of this door, it’s over. Do you understand?”

Jeong-oh, speaking boldly, took a step back and grasped the doorknob.

The door opened.

At that moment,

Ji-heon quickly stepped forward and urgently covered her hand with his.

The door closed again.

Jeong-oh’s shoulder was trapped against his chest. His embrace was searing hot, almost boiling.

He was looking down at her with smoldering eyes.

Ch31 - Who do I resemble?

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Ji-heon hurriedly closed the office door.

Before he could think, his body moved first. By chance, he ended up grasping Jeong-oh’s hand, which was still holding the doorknob.

After the door closed, Jeong-oh immediately pulled her hand away from Ji-heon.

As she glared at him, Ji-heon found himself at a loss for words.

This was the first time he had encountered such a woman. No, it was almost the first time for everything.

He had only called her over to give her cookies, and now he found himself cornered.

She was looking at him fiercely, demanding an apology with her gaze and expression.

Her unwavering eyes made Ji-heon feel tense. It genuinely seemed like she was ready to throw everything away and leave the company.

Jeong-oh truly had no regrets.

Her declaration of quitting was a final ultimatum.

Having once again confirmed what kind of person Ji-heon was, she felt there was no other choice. For Ye-na’s sake, she thought it would be wiser to give up on him.

So, she was a bit surprised when Ji-heon desperately grabbed her.

This was her true last chance with him.

She had a glimmer of hope.

Even if her existence meant little to the man who had lost his memories, she was still a member of his department.

He stared intently at her, looking angry.

It seemed as though he was thinking, “What kind of person is this?”

Even though she spoke harshly, Jeong-oh couldn’t help but feel intimidated by his gaze. Still, she didn’t back down.

An uncomfortable silence hung between them. Then,

“I’m sorry.”

Finally, his lips parted.

His expression was still sour, and his attitude was terrible, but for some reason, Jeong-oh’s eyes began to well up.

“…What are you sorry for?”

It would have been fine just to accept the apology, but she found herself wanting more. It was a bold question, but she was hesitant to raise her voice too much, fearing he might explode.

After a moment, he answered again.

“I’m sorry for teasing you, Lee Jeong-oh.”

“And?”

“…I’m also sorry for making you work too late.”

His face was still sulky, but his pronunciation was clear.

The corners of her lips wanted to rise involuntarily. Her eyelids were growing hotter. She didn't want to cry or laugh, but it felt like she might end up with a strange expression, both crying and laughing at the same time. Jeong-oh desperately held her lips together.

"What are you going to do from now on?"

"As you wish."

"As I wish? Do you know what I wish for?"

Ji-heon sighed and turned his head slightly to the side, as if he didn't want to meet her gaze.

The situation was certainly not to her liking. Still, she acted quite obediently.

The power of announcing her resignation was truly remarkable! Jeong-oh felt a surge of excitement as if she had discovered Ji-heon's weakness. Just moments ago, she had been despondent, but now her spirits were lifted.

With the tables unexpectedly turned, she needed to seize this opportunity.

"Please uncover the truth behind last Thursday's incident. I really didn't do anything wrong. There must have been someone who entered the meeting room when I stepped out to take a call. I'd appreciate it if you could look into that."

"Got it."

"And I definitely uploaded a file to the company cloud. Someone must have deleted it. I hope you can find out about that too."

Ji-heon nodded quietly.

His compliance sparked a hunger that she hadn't felt earlier.

“I’ll take the cookies. I’ll enjoy them with my team.”

“You’re going to eat them together?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

Jeong-oh found it odd how his expression changed at her mention of sharing the cookies.

“Did you put something weird in the cookies?”

“Do I look like that kind of person?”

His retort was sharp.

If that was the case, it seemed he hadn’t done anything suspicious with the cookies.

“Please only put cookies in the box.”

Don’t include your feelings.

Don’t put any emotions into the cookies.

Don’t try to sway me with food. It reminds me of a time seven years ago.

She lightly advised him and hugged the cookie box.

“Thank you. I’ll be going now.”

Despite carrying the heavy cookie box, Jeong-oh left the office feeling lighthearted.

Click.

The door closed behind her.

Left in the office, Ji-heon scowled and slumped into his chair.

Lee Jeong-oh had an extraordinary skill for manipulating people.

Amid everything, her words kept echoing in his ears.

“Even if you gave up everything you have, I wouldn’t trade it for my everything.”

Her everything.

My everything.

She had drawn a clear line, indicating that she and he were entirely different. She trivialized everything he had, which he had never even counted.

Though it annoyed him, Ji-heon couldn’t bring himself to say anything. Somehow, he felt it might really be true.

Even if he gave up everything he owned, it seemed unlikely that she would ever enter his world.

And that was why he had let out that apology.

The heartfelt apology was not genuine. It was merely a means to keep her close.

Still, the moment he uttered the apology, a hint of remorse did arise within him.

All of this—the phenomenon of Lee Jeong-oh, who manipulated his feelings—was infuriating and frustrating.

Yet, her faint smile as she took the cookies overshadowed everything.

Ultimately, he thought, since the result was good, it didn’t matter, and Ji-heon found himself laughing in disbelief.

Jeong-oh encountered Gi-hoon and Eun-joo in the hallway. The two were lingering around, unable to return to their seats, waiting for Jeong-oh to exit

the office.

“Were you waiting here?”

“Deputy!”

Gi-hoon exclaimed as if he had found a lost comrade in battle.

Eun-joo’s eyes widened when she saw the large box Jeong-oh was carrying.

“What is this?”

“It’s cookies and other stuff. The director gave them to me, apologizing for making me work late last Thursday.”

“He apologized for making you work late and gave you cookies?”

“Oh, he was going to throw them away.”

“He gave you what he was going to throw away as a gift?”

“Well, that’s what he said.”

“Oh, Director Jung is truly despicable. Absolutely.”

As expected, the noble Ko Eun-joo didn’t look favorably upon Ji-heon’s gift. Jeong-oh shrugged her shoulders.

Ji Ji-heon, you really need to manage your reputation better.

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The cookies and chocolates Ji-heon had gifted were enormous in quantity. Even after sharing them fairly with her team, she ended up bringing a significant amount home.

As Jeong-oh took the cookies and chocolates out of her bag, Ye-na’s mouth dropped open in surprise.

“Mom, is this a gift for Ye-na?”

“Of course.”

It’s a gift from Dad.

“Ye-na, you can only eat one a day. Understand?”

“Can’t I eat two?”

“Okay, two.”

Ye-na, having struck a deal with her mom, eagerly tore open the cookie packaging.

The cookies were so big that Ye-na’s small hands and face seemed even smaller in comparison.

Ye-na opened her tiny mouth wide and took a big bite out of the cookie. Crumbs were everywhere, both on her face and dropping onto the floor. She wiped her mouth and beamed with delight.

“It’s delicious!”

“Eat a lot.”

“But you told me I could only eat two.”

“Two is plenty. How much more do you think you can eat of this giant one?”

Hehe.

Ye-na giggled happily and took another adorable bite.

Her dad had given this to her.

Watching Ye-na enjoy her treat, Jeong-oh felt an odd sensation. It was as if someone was gently squeezing her heart.

“Mom, who gave this to you?”

“The director at my company gave it to me.”

“Just you?”

“Yep, just me.”

“Does the director like you?”

“No, I received it because I’ve been working late.”

Jeong-oh replied while wiping the crumbs off Ye-na’s mouth.

“I hope he does.”

“Why?”

“Then he might give you more cookies.”

“Mom can buy cookies too. The ones I buy are tastier.”

It was amusing to see her daughter develop a fondness for Ji-heon, based solely on the cookies, without knowing anything about him.

Jeong-oh gazed at Ye-na, who was glowing with happiness over a single cookie.

When looking at her child, time seemed to fly by unnoticed.

Ye-na, meeting her mom’s gaze, asked suddenly, “Mom, who do I look like?”

It was an unexpected question.

Momentarily recalling Ji-heon, Jeong-oh felt a bit flustered and stumbled over her words.

“Uh, don’t you know? You look just like Mom.”

“But Mom is good at drawing.”

“Mom couldn’t draw at all when she was your age. And how good do you think I was? For a seven-year-old, you’re drawing really well. You look just like me.”

Jeong-oh pointed to the animal frame Ye-na had made at kindergarten.

Still, Ye-na refuted, “But Mom doesn’t know how to play Go.”

“That’s because Mom is an adult! You won’t know how when you’re a baby either, Ye-na.”

“Mom can’t play Go, though.”

“If I study, I can do it!”

Jeong-oh’s voice rose in pitch in response to her daughter’s piercing remarks.

After all the encouragement she had given, her daughter was now teasing her.

Pouting, Ye-na told her grandmother, “Grandma, Mommy yelled at me.”

“Mommy feels guilty. Mommy can’t play Go like our Ye-na can.”

Ye-na burst into laughter at her grandma’s response.

“Mommy can’t play Go, ha ha ha!” The sound of her child’s laughter filled the house.

Eventually, Jeong-oh couldn’t help but laugh along with her daughter.

Sometimes, the worries from outside the home find their way inside.

Bringing work home is quite common.

In moments when she finds herself frustrated over not being able to think of the perfect tagline that fits her client’s needs, the sound of laughter from the living room makes Jeong-oh perk up her ears.

What’s so funny that the child is laughing so heartily? The innocent laughter pulls her away from her work. When she arrives, she finds Ye-na giggling at some trivial TV show.

There’s a stark difference in humor between adults and children, making it hard to laugh along immediately. Yet, the boundless joy of her child eventually draws Jeong-oh into the laughter.

Being a part of that laughter made her forget all her worries.

She was everything to her.

Her entire life. The sound of her child’s laughter. Her child’s happiness.

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The next day, Ji-heon called Jeong-oh to his office.

Ji-heon diligently completed the task that Jeong-oh assigned to him.

He showed her the location data for the security cameras obtained from the security management office.

“As you can see, there are no cameras in the conference room where this assistant was.”

“There aren’t many cameras installed in the company, are there?”

“It’s best to install only enough to identify if a theft occurs. A surveillance atmosphere isn’t desirable.”

That was a reasonable point. The only cameras installed were a few in the hallways. There was a camera in the conference room hallway, but it couldn’t see the entrance of the conference room that Jeong-oh had used.

“I think there should at least be a camera at the entrance of the conference room.”

Jeong-oh offered her opinion, but Ji-heon didn’t respond.

This man tended to ignore responses when he felt cornered.

‘Clever.’

Somehow, that reminded her of Ye-na.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Uh? Did I laugh? I didn’t laugh. Ahem.”

She had inadvertently chuckled while thinking about Ye-na, and Ji-heon caught her. When he pointed it out, Jeong-oh cleared her throat.

Ji-heon, giving a slight hint, showed her the CCTV footage.

“There’s no camera at the entrance of the conference room, so it’s hard to determine who the perpetrator is or even if there was one, but there is some meaningful data.”

Jeong-oh’s gaze moved to the CCTV screen Ji-heon pointed at. The people from Team 1 were gathered and talking. Soon after, they dispersed.

Then Ji-heon showed her footage from another hallway’s CCTV.

“If a person captured by camera 3 came this way, they should show up on camera 4.”

“Ah… but it doesn’t seem to show them.”

Jeong-oh carefully observed the employee Ji-heon had indicated.

It was quite some time later that the employee Ji-heon pointed out appeared on camera 4. Between cameras 3 and 4 was the conference room where Jeong-oh had been on Thursday.

This colleague had had subtle friction with Jeong-oh, so she figured it could be true. However, it was just a suspicion; without solid evidence, she couldn’t press the issue.

“Can we check the cloud records?”

Upon Jeong-oh’s request, Ji-heon began typing on the laptop. A screen displaying various symbols and numbers appeared.

“This assistant has a record of uploading a file titled ‘Proposal for DaeWon Liquor Phase 1’ to the cloud. There’s also a record of it being deleted. However, we don’t know who deleted it.”

“Ah… so there’s no information on who deleted the file. It looks like it was done on a public computer, not a personal one.”

“Someone used the public computer in the C Output Room.”

Since the equipment in the C Output Room was quite old, employees didn’t use it often.

Someone accessed the public computer with a shared ID and deleted the file, making it impossible to identify the culprit. Of course, there were also no security cameras in the C Output Room.

After a long silence, Ji-heon stood up.

“Let’s just ask the suspicious person directly.”

“That’s reckless! Without evidence, they’ll never admit to it.”

If they pressed too hard, it could just spread rumors about Ji-heon being ruthless.

Jeong-oh smiled and tried to dissuade Ji-heon. “I’ll handle it from here.”

Ch32 - Love

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In the afternoon at the Go academy,

Ye-na sat deep in thought, placing one Go stone at a time on the board.

I’m good at Go.

But my grandma and mom can’t play Go.

Then why am I good at it?

What if my dad was good at Go?

Jeong-oh had never talked to Ye-na about her dad.

Whenever the topic of “dad” came up, Jeong-oh would smoothly change the subject. Naturally, Ye-na’s thoughts would follow her mother’s lead.

She wasn’t particularly curious about her dad and enjoyed the fact that she could monopolize her mom without needing to fight with him. She was content with the idea of being her mom’s eternal companion.

That had been the case until recently, but since becoming friends with Do-bin, Ye-na found herself thinking about her dad more often.

Do-bin was kind and a good friend, but he talked a lot about his family. Stories about his dad came up naturally and frequently.

While Do-bin casually shared stories about his dad, they sometimes felt hard for Ye-na to relate to since she didn’t have one.

As she watched Do-bin, who wasn’t really studying Go but just playing around, Ye-na suddenly asked, “What do you like about having a dad?”

It was surprising for Ye-na to bring up the topic of dads first.

Do-bin, pleased by the question, thought for a moment before responding. “My mom says Dad earns money so we can eat and live.”

So a dad is someone who earns money for what we need?

Since my mom and grandma also earn money, does that mean I don’t need a dad?

Ye-na tilted her head and asked again, “What else do you like about having a dad?”

“Hmm… it’s nice when we go to the swimming pool.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a boy, I can’t go to the bathroom with my mom; I have to go with my dad, like going to the toilet.”

“Then since I’m a girl, I don’t need a dad, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Do-bin nodded, then suddenly seemed to remember something and looked at Ye-na.

“Oh, but there’s more. It’s nice when I go to the hospital because my dad carries me.”

“Your dad carries you?”

“Yeah. When I go with my mom, we just hold hands, but when I go with my dad, he carries me like this.”

Do-bin mimicked holding a doll in his arms.

“Dads are strong.”

Until then, Do-bin’s words hadn’t affected her much, but the mention of being carried stirred something warm in her chest.

So dads can carry you when you go to the hospital because they’re strong.

“Ye-na, when I become a dad, I’ll carry my kids to the hospital too.”

As Ye-na quietly nodded, Do-bin continued to promote himself.

Not really hearing his confession, Ye-na muttered to herself, “Yeah, I wish I had a dad.”

“Should I ask? I can tell my dad to be your dad too.”

“That probably won’t work.”

“It might! My dad said he would do anything for me.”

Do-bin continued to mention his dad’s good qualities.

Ye-na couldn’t easily refuse and told him twice more that it probably wouldn’t work.

After their class ended and Ye-na was taken to the cafeteria,

On their way home, Do-bin spoke innocently to Jin-seo.

“Mom, Ye-na and I decided to share our dads.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Ye-na doesn’t have a dad.”

Do-bin smiled contentedly, feeling proud.

Love is…

Mom and Dad love me and want to give me everything. Do-bin felt the same. He wanted to give Ye-na whatever she wanted because he liked her. He was happy to have something to give to Ye-na.

Jin-seo suppressed a laugh and said to Do-bin, “But Do-bin, you wouldn’t be able to marry Ye-na if you do that. Are you okay with that?”

“Why?”

“Since your dad is the same, you two would become siblings. Siblings can’t marry each other. Didn’t you know that?”

The smile that had been on Do-bin’s face disappeared, replaced by a look of contemplation.

“What should I do? I already promised Ye-na!”

“Well, that’s a big problem.”

At the unexpected response, Do-bin’s eyes widened, as if his whole world had crumbled.

In fact, he hadn’t even had the chance to talk to Ye-na about marriage yet…

Last Thursday, on Ye-na’s birthday, he had prepared a letter and a poem, but he never got to show them to her. When he saw Ye-na crying because her mom hadn’t come home yet, he wanted to make her laugh and ended up performing a silly dance and some magic tricks instead. He couldn’t just cling to his friend who was calling for her mom and say “Let’s get married!”

Love is like that…

Things just happen and lead to unexpected decisions.

He had felt proud of making that decision, but now he didn’t know what to do since he had already made a promise.

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In the evening,

Jeong-oh and Gi-hoon were having a conversation at their desks.

“Hey, did you hear that someone deliberately planted a virus on your laptop?”

“Well, I don’t know about that. I heard it’s a virus that’s been going around lately, and someone from the planning team has been having trouble with it too.”

“Oh… so it was just a coincidence?”

“Looks like it. But it’s true that someone intentionally deleted the files I uploaded to the cloud.”

“Oh, so there was a culprit after all! I knew it!”

“Yeah. At least it’s been clarified that I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Do you think we can find the culprit?”

“They said they couldn’t figure it out because it was done on a public computer.”

“That’s too bad.”

The office was quiet, so their conversation was easily overheard.

“Ah! Wait! I think we might be able to find the culprit!”

Just nearby, Jo Si-nae from Production Team 1 perked up her ears.

“Really? How?”

“Have you ever heard of a fingerprint recognition mouse?”

“Oh, those exist?”

“Yeah. I can’t remember if it was in Room B or C, but someone once complained to the IT department that the public computer and mouse there were broken. When the IT staff replaced them, they switched to a fingerprint recognition mouse. You know the part of the mouse where your thumb touches? That fingerprint gets saved on the computer. With that info, we can find out who keeps messing up the computer.”

“Oh, really? We should check that out! We need to see which public computer the culprit used.”

Si-nae’s hands trembled with anxiety as she listened.

“Yeah. You should check quickly. Since it’s for security, the information isn’t sent over the network and is only stored on the computer in an encrypted form. We can’t let that information be erased.”

“Right. If the virus that’s going around gets to that, we might never catch the culprit. We need to act fast. But since it’s sensitive information, I can’t guarantee the IT department will cooperate.”

“If it’s too much for you, I can go with you. My colleague works in the IT department.”

“Oh! Thank you so much, Gi-hoon! Let’s go first thing tomorrow morning!”

“Sure!”

That was the end of their conversation.

Jeong-oh and Gi-hoon returned to their work, the sound of their typing ringing cheerfully through the office.

Si-nae cautiously stood up from her seat. Her hands trembled, and her heart raced.

It seemed like the plan to plant the virus on Jeong-oh’s laptop had gone smoothly, but the problem was the public computer in the C printing room.

Si-nae had deleted the files that Jeong-oh uploaded to the cloud last Thursday from that computer. She thought everything had gone perfectly, but she never imagined that the mouse there would be a fingerprint recognition one.

Si-nae grabbed a USB drive and stealthily headed to the C printing room. It was the most secluded area in the office, and since it was evening, she didn't run into anyone. Still, she tried to keep her footsteps quiet as she approached the room.

It was a tiny space. The computer in the corner was the same as it had been then. The mouse too… or was it? She couldn't remember clearly, as she had been too nervous at the time to notice such details.

Regardless, the mouse in front of her was definitely a fingerprint recognition mouse. Just as Gi-hoon had said, the part where her right thumb would touch was distinctive. It seemed like it could read fingerprints from that spot.

Si-nae wrapped her thumb in a tissue and turned on the computer. There was no issue starting it up.

But where do I find my fingerprint information?

They said the fingerprint information was saved on the computer. However, Si-nae didn't know how to navigate the computer very well. As she started pressing various buttons, she suddenly heard a rustling noise from outside and jumped in surprise.

I have to solve this quickly!

There was no choice; she had to resort to her last resort.

Si-nae pulled a USB drive out of her pocket. A friend of a friend had made it for her, and it was incredibly convenient. All she had to do was plug it into the computer, and it would automatically spread the virus inside.

Si-nae plugged the USB into the computer and restarted it. A scene she had seen on Jeong-oh's laptop flashed across the screen.

"It worked!"

"What worked?"

"Ah!"

Si-nae jumped in surprise at the sound of a woman's voice behind her.

Jeong-oh and Gi-hoon stood there like grim reapers. Si-nae's face turned bright red.

"Uh… what are you doing here, sir?"

"I asked you first. Jo Si-nae, what are you doing right now?"

"I was, um, just going to print something!"

"It seems like you're not just printing; it looks like you're planting a virus on the computer."

"What kind of nonsense is that!"

"That's exactly what's showing on the screen. That's the same virus that was on my laptop. Why are you trying to ruin a perfectly fine computer?"

"I'm not doing anything like that! I just turned on the computer and this screen appeared!"

Si-nae shouted, her veins bulging in her neck.

She couldn't crumble here.

At that moment, Gi-hoon stepped forward and unplugged the USB from the computer.

"What's this USB?"

“……”

“This USB belongs to you, doesn’t it? Didn’t you say you got it as a souvenir from the wedding expo about a month ago?”

Si-nae was surprised that Gi-hoon remembered such details. She momentarily panicked but quickly insisted,

“Did I go to the wedding expo alone? And I never received such a USB! I got a different one!”

“Alright. I guess the camera will reveal the truth.”

Jeong-oh sighed and pointed to a corner of the printing room ceiling.

This time, Si-nae’s face went pale.

There shouldn’t have been a camera here! When did that get installed?

“So, you were the one who deleted the files I uploaded to the cloud from here, Jo Si-nae.”

“Do you have any proof? I said, do you have any proof!”

“The files that were deleted from the cloud were deleted from this location: the C printing room. You came here to delete that information, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t!”

“Well, then let’s set that aside. You can’t deny that you planted a virus on my laptop.”

“What kind of nonsense are you talking about? Your delusions are laughable.”

There was no evidence. The erased past could not serve as proof. If she kept insisting, they would eventually run out of things to say.

But Jeong-oh wouldn’t back down either.

He took the USB from Gi-hoon.

“We can find out what’s going on by analyzing this USB. We’ll see if the virus inside is the same as the one that damaged my laptop. If it’s the same, the encrypted codes contained within will also match.”

A chill ran down Si-nae’s spine.

At that moment, Ji-heon appeared with a few other employees.

“It’s too noisy. What’s going on?”

“Jo Si-nae should explain this herself.”

Jeong-oh said to Si-nae.

She had completely walked into a trap.

Ch33 - Unfair

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“I… uh, uh-huh…”

Jo Si-nae burst into tears and collapsed on the spot instead of answering.

Jo Yu-ri, who had come running late and didn’t know what was going on, rushed over to help Si-nae up. Eun-bi, who had been standing behind Ji-heon, couldn’t bring herself to approach Si-nae.

“Jo Si-nae, don’t cry. Just tell us what’s going on. Why is the computer like that?”

Ji-heon asked, his expression stern as he pressed for answers.

Huh-uh, huh-huh…

Si-nae could only cry.

Due to the hardships she faced in school because of Lee Jeong-oh, she had come to resent him. She had no reason to like Chae Eun-bi, Ji-heon’s girlfriend, either. Si-nae had deliberately tormented Jeong-oh in front of Eun-bi.

Then, following the incident with the drinking party with Daewon Liquor, Si-nae found herself in a position where she had to report to Ji-heon daily. Ji-heon showed no hesitation in humiliating her, flaunting how Lee Jeong-oh had manipulated him.

What started as an act to win Eun-bi’s heart gradually turned into genuine resentment. She despised Jeong-oh so much that she wanted revenge.

Si-nae walked around with a USB that could plant a virus on devices, always looking for an opportunity.

When Jeong-oh had something to do, the chance came quickly. Taking advantage of the moment he left his seat, she spread the virus on his laptop and headed to the rarely occupied C printing room to delete the files he had uploaded to the cloud.

That day, she felt great. Chae Eun-bi seemed very annoyed that Ji-heon was close to Jeong-oh, but Si-nae didn't care.

What she thought would pass as a minor incident turned into this disaster today.

"Jo Si-nae, this can't go on. Let's talk again tomorrow. You can finish your work for today and head home."

"B-but, Director, Jo Si-nae has materials that need to be sent to the advertiser by today," Yu-ri said to Ji-heon.

"I'd like Yu-ri to handle it instead."

"……"

"I can't entrust company business to an employee whose identity is suspicious."

Ji-heon issued his cold command. Yu-ri's eyes widened in fear.

"Jo Si-nae, I'll need to take this USB for investigation."

Ji-heon took the USB from Jeong-oh's hand. He hadn't even heard the whole story yet, but he knew exactly that the USB belonged to Si-nae.

I've fallen into their trap!

The realization filled Si-nae with rage, and she cried even harder.

Once the crowd dispersed, Chae Eun-bi walked up to her.

“Jo Si-nae, I hope you can clear your name quickly. If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know… I’m really sorry about what happened.”

“……”

“But… did Jo Si-nae cause my Ji-heon oppa to work overtime with Lee Jeong-oh?”

Eun-bi’s cold reprimand made Si-nae feel as if an arm had been ripped off.

Si-nae gaped in shock, staring blankly at Eun-bi.

Eun-bi then turned to Jo Yu-ri, who was standing next to Si-nae.

“Jo Yu-ri, hurry up and get to work.”

“Ah, yes, yes. Yes, ma’am.”

Yu-ri let go of Si-nae’s arm, awkwardly getting up to follow Eun-bi.

Si-nae was left alone.

She had been raising Jo Si-nae like a maid, but it all came to nothing.

Eun-bi clenched her jaw, swallowing her anger.

Once again, it was Lee Jeong-oh and now Jeong Ji-heon.

The two had conspired together to bring down Jo Si-nae.

In truth, Eun-bi had known what Si-nae did last Thursday. After Si-nae disappeared for a while, the chaos ensued, and Eun-bi had caught on.

Showing her dislike so openly, she’s bound to be found out soon.

Eun-bi lamented Si-nae’s foolishness.

She despised Jeong-oh even more for closing the gap with Ji-heon while making various excuses.

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The next day.

A detailed analysis of the data contained in the USB Si-nae had was conducted, and it was confirmed to match the virus found on Jeong-oh’s computer.

After receiving the results, Ji-heon immediately summoned Si-nae to his office.

“Jo Si-nae.”

“……Yes, ……Director.”

Si-nae answered in a trembling voice.

“No matter how much you deny it, Jo Si-nae, the results have come out this way, and the company cannot overlook it.”

“……”

“We cannot dismiss any possibility that you are an industrial spy, have a personal vendetta against Lee Jeong-oh, or have some other motive, so we can no longer entrust you with important tasks.”

Ji-heon spoke sharply. He seemed utterly devoid of compassion. Though Si-nae was filled with frustration, she couldn’t retort.

Si-nae was immediately excluded from all her assigned duties and was transferred from the Planning and Production Division to the Management Division. She would now be tasked with guarding the reading room.

A design major guarding the library. It was the greatest humiliation she had faced since starting her career. However, since she hadn’t prepared for a job change, she had no choice but to comply with orders. Now, she would quietly prepare for her next career move.

While Si-nae’s situation was resolved cleanly, Jeong-oh was left with a lingering discomfort.

If it were me, I would have lectured her never to do such a thing again.

What she experienced was crueler than he had anticipated. Ji-heon’s decision was formidable. Still, it was an unavoidable choice since there was no way to confirm what kind of suspicious character Si-nae was.

“Ki-hoon, thank you so much for this.”

In the hallway heading to the conference room, Jeong-oh expressed his gratitude to Ki-hoon.

Yesterday, Si-nae had fallen into the trap they had set together. The fingerprint recognition mouse was something Jeong-oh had quickly purchased that day, and the company didn’t even have a system to store fingerprint data.

It was all thanks to Jeong-oh’s wit and Ki-hoon’s convincing acting. If Ki-hoon hadn’t cooperated, they wouldn’t have caught the culprit.

Ki-hoon replied nonchalantly.

“If you’re grateful, I have a wish too.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Can I call you ‘noona’?”

“Pfft.”

“Then, I guess it’s fine to drop the formalities, right?”

This kid is being a nuisance. Jeong-oh playfully nudged Ki-hoon on the shoulder.

As Ki-hoon was pushed aside, he quickly returned with a grin.

“Sure, drop the formalities and curse if you want.”

“Why would I curse? Not at you, anyway. I just said that. I’ll continue to honor you and treat you well.”

What a joke.

The two of them were so caught up in their little world that they didn’t realize Ji-heon was walking in the same direction behind them.

They also had no idea Ji-heon was watching them intently, shooting daggers with his gaze.

Ji-heon felt slighted. Isn’t this too much?

Lee Jeong-oh. I was the one who helped entirely, yet why is he only thanking Song Ki-hoon?

I apologized when asked, found the culprit when asked, and took charge when asked. And now, I even dealt with the disciplinary action against Jo Si-nae.

I did everything you asked, so why is the credit going to that guy?

It was utterly frustrating.

Throughout the meeting, Ji-heon’s mood was heavy.

It seemed Jeong-oh and Ki-hoon’s bond had only strengthened.

He was also disappointed in Jeong-oh.

I mean, you went through the trouble of asking for an apology, but you can’t even say thank you?

Isn’t there anything you’re grateful to me for?

Ji-heon, who had been watching the production meeting with a sullen expression, sat there in silence and then left.

In the hallway leading to the office, he ran into Seung-kyu.

“What’s with that expression?”

“Why do you care?”

“Your expression seems a bit more sour than usual,” Seung-kyu pointed out, and Ji-heon found himself at a loss for words.

Once inside the office, Ji-heon flopped down onto the sofa, as if he were going to collapse onto it.

“I sent Jo Si-nae to the Management Division.”

“Yeah.”

Seung-kyu sensed that Ji-heon wasn’t in the mood to discuss work, so he quickly changed the subject. In truth, he had come to see Ji-heon for a favor.

“Next Monday, you know? You kept that time open, right?”

“What? What time?”

“Come on, how could you forget that? You promised to come to my house again in front of Dabin. Don’t you remember?”

Ah, that…

Only then did Ji-heon recall.

A girl with bright eyes and a fair complexion. She was as beautiful as a doll.

He had rashly made plans to meet her again one Monday.

Ji-heon hadn’t expected Seung-kyu to bring up such a casual promise again.

“Do the kids remember?”

“Of course! They definitely do!”

“…”

“Any promise made with kids has to be kept. They live for the joy of waiting for those promises. You’d understand if you were a dad, but it doesn’t seem like you’re getting married anytime soon… You don’t have any plans that day, do you?”

I don’t have any plans. I was supposed to be at the office since I don’t have any other schedule, but Seung-kyu’s nagging was making things awkward.

I can’t just hang out with the kids.

I don’t even know how to treat them.

“I’m not feeling confident.”

“Please just come!”

Seeing Ji-heon show such a weak side, Seung-kyu raised his voice.

“Come on, give me some face as a dad! Our Dabin wants to see you.”

“Not Dabin, but her girlfriend.”

“Right! Anyway! Please give Dabin some face!”

Seung-kyu exaggeratedly displayed his disappointment.

“I’m not asking for a promotion or for you to get Dabin a job. All I’m asking is that you hold my hand and come to my house next Monday. Is that too much for a friend?”

“Why would I hold your hand?”

“Hey, that’s just a figure of speech! Why are you being so prickly today?”

His friend really did look upset.

Realizing he had been talking too much about himself, Seung-kyu reflected on Ji-heon’s feelings.

He decided to bring up a topic that seemed fun.

“So, any progress with Lee Jeong-o?”

It was a light question, but Ji-heon’s expression turned serious.

As Seung-kyu sat directly in front of Ji-heon, Ji-heon opened up about his concerns.

“She said I resemble my dad.”

“…Huh?”

“She said I look like her deceased father.”

“Lee Jeong-o said that?”

“…”

“Wow. That’s awkward.”

How tragic.

It seemed nearly impossible to start anything with a girl who said he resembled her late father. Seung-kyu felt pity for his friend, who appeared to be starting a difficult romance.

“Still, it’s a complicated feeling, but maybe there’s still room? It’s better than being disliked, right?”

At that moment—

“What are you talking about?”

The door swung open, and Eun-bi entered.

The unexpected visit made both of their expressions sour.

Eun-bi was having a hard time composing herself as well, her face twitching slightly.

“Did Lee Jeong-o say that you resemble someone?”

Having noticed Ji-heon’s uncomfortable expression during the meeting, Eun-bi gathered her things and rushed to the office. She suspected that Seung-kyu and Ji-heon were present. The faint sound of their conversation reached her ears.

Taking advantage of the secretary’s absence, Eun-bi pressed her ear against the office door and was taken aback by what she heard.

Lee Jeong-o said to Ji-heon that she resembled her father?

“Hah. Lee Jeong-o said that? To you?”

Eun-bi questioned Ji-heon as if demanding an answer. Ji-heon remained silent.

Though Eun-bi usually maintained her manners around him, she was beyond caring at this moment.

Lee Jeong-o, what a schemer!

Unable to hold back her anger, Eun-bi stormed out of the office.

“Ugh, wow. It looks like Manager Cha Eun-bi is angry. I’ll take my leave then. Handle it well! Contact me if you need help!”

Seung-kyu felt that it wasn’t his place to intervene and hurriedly exited the office.

Eun-bi organized the meeting room and called out to Jeong-o, who returned late.

“Lee Jeong-o, come here for a moment.”

“Yes?”

“Hurry.”

As he was about to sit down, Jeong-o went back out into the hallway.

“What is it?”

“Let’s go; I have somewhere to be.”

Eun-bi grabbed Jeong-o’s wrist. Startled by her swift and forceful grip, Jeong-o stumbled but was pulled along.

“Can’t you let go?”

“Just follow me quickly.”

When Jeong-o resisted, Eun-bi released her grip and walked ahead.

Despite feeling upset, Jeong-o followed Eun-bi just to see what she would do.

Eun-bi led Jeong-o to Ji-heon’s office.

As Jeong-o entered the office, Ji-heon’s eyes widened in recognition.

“Jeong-o, you explain it.”

Eun-bi stood between Ji-heon and Jeong-o, confronting Jeong-o.

“You’ve never seen your dad, right? You don’t even know who your real father is.”

Jeong-o’s eyes trembled.

“That’s what your mom said when you were in your first year of high school. She begged our teacher to look after her daughter. She said she didn’t know who her father was but that she had never caused her mom trouble.”

“……”

“You’re from a single-mother family, aren’t you?”

“…”

“Or not? If I’m wrong, I’ll apologize.”

Jeong-o clenched his fists tightly against his hips. An unusual emotion surged within him.

It was a side of himself he didn’t want Ji-heon to see. He could have told the Ji-heon from seven years ago, and he had, but he never wanted to reveal that truth to the Ji-heon of today.

It was humiliating.

Eun-bi let out a loud, mocking laugh and continued speaking.

“What? Ji-heon oppa looks like your dad? What a scam.”

“Cha Eun-bi, enough.”

Unable to bear it any longer, Ji-heon spoke to Eun-bi. But she didn’t stop.

“This guy even lied to oppa to get close to him!”

“Cha Eun-bi.”

“It’s true! Isn’t that right, Ji-heon?”

It was Jeong-o who interrupted Ji-heon’s words.

“Actually, it’s not my dad; it’s my oppa. Ji-heon doesn’t resemble my dad; he looks like my ex-boyfriend.”

He swallowed his tears and spoke the truth.

Ch34 - Someday, May the Flower Rain Fall

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Silence lingered in the wake of the truth that had swept through.

Jeong-o lowered his gaze and continued speaking. He didn't have the courage to look at Ji-heon.

"I'm sorry for lying. I thought saying he resembled my ex-boyfriend would make me look like I was trying to get closer to you, so I lied to draw a line."

Right. It was something that would eventually come to light.

Such humiliation. Such feelings.

Though he felt miserable now, it would all be over with just this one time.

"I won't let anything like this happen again."

Jeong-o bowed his head and left the office.

After Jeong-o departed, Eun-bi stared at the door as it opened and closed, taking slow breaths to calm herself.

Now, she had defeated Lee Jeong-o.

The lying Jeong-o had acknowledged he was a liar, so Ji-heon would surely come to realize something.

What the ultimate fate of a woman like her would be.

“Oppa almost got into big trouble. I told you, that kid stole my stuff once.”

Eun-bi, now somewhat relieved, spoke in a surprisingly calm voice.

“If I had trusted him without suspicion and he touched your precious things, what would have happened?”

“Get out.”

If he were shocked, it would make sense for him to ask more about Lee Jeong-o.

But his response left Eun-bi in shock, contrary to her expectations.

Eun-bi lifted her gaze to Ji-heon.

His eyes, dry and cold to the bone, stared at her intensely. It felt as if they were filled with disdain for all existence.

“Don’t ever interfere in my affairs again.”

His voice sent chills down her spine. Nothing could escape her open mouth.

It felt as if his large hands, tightly clenched below her waist, could rise up at any moment to choke her neck.

In that terrifying moment, the thought of wanting to regain his affection was overtaken by the need to leave this place as quickly as possible. Eun-bi hurriedly fled the office.

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“Is there anything special you need to do today?”

As the end of the workday approached, Team Leader Seong Mi-ran asked Jeong-o.

“Nothing special. We have the PT meeting during overtime, of course.”

“No, you’re leaving early today.”

“Really? Aren’t we having a meeting?”

“You can skip it for a day. Just go.”

Mi-ran instructed him to leave on time.

She had noticed that Jeong-o’s expression had noticeably darkened after he was dragged to Ji-heon’s office by Eun-bi.

It was evident that something unusual had happened today.

“Go on. Go and rest.”

“…Alright. I’ll leave early then.”

With Mi-ran pushing him along, Jeong-o ended up leaving work early.

On his way to the restaurant, he bought ice cream that Ye-na liked.

“Mom, I’m here!”

“Mom!”

“Oh my, who is this? What brings you here so early today?”

As Jeong-o opened the door to the restaurant, Ye-na ran up to him, and Guk-soon looked shocked, as if the sun had risen in the west.

“I finished work early.”

“Mom, what’s this?”

“Dinner.”

“I haven’t eaten yet. I’m hungry. Give me food.”

“What’s this?”

During the conversation between Jeong-o and Guk-soon, Ye-na kept pointing at the ice cream bag Jeong-o was holding and asking. Her slyness in pretending not to know it was ice cream was definitely something she inherited from Jeong Ji-heon.

“I bought it for Ye-na. Did you eat dinner?”

“Yeah! Since I ate dinner, can I have ice cream?”

Ye-na almost snatched the bag from Jeong-o’s hands.

Guk-soon quickly set the table for dinner. Even though it was just one person’s serving, the side dishes were abundant.

Jeong-o took a big scoop of rice and brought it to his mouth.

Seeing this, Guk-soon asked,

“Did something bad happen?”

“How did you know?”

“Mom knows everything.”

Mom knows. She knows that whenever her daughter is going through tough times or feels bad, she always eats a lot. Eating much more rice than side dishes signifies that her daughter isn’t feeling well.

“Mom, back in my first year of high school, there was a kid I really hated. I ran into him at work today.”

“Why did you hate him? You could’ve just gotten along.”

“He’s just a bad person by nature. But he’s still the same.”

“……”

“I had a bit of a clash with him today, and it’s so frustrating.”

Jeong-o grabbed his spoon and slammed it on the table with a fist.

“I’ll give him a real piece of my mind.”

“……”

“I won’t forget this! I will definitely get my revenge!”

As Jeong-o burned with determination, Guk-soon clicked her tongue beside him.

“How can someone with a kid be so narrow-minded? Instead of clearing things up and getting along, they just hold onto grudges.”

“Mom, don’t you know? People don’t change. If I get close to him, I’ll lose my own integrity. Once an enemy, always an enemy.”

“Enemy? What has he done, sold the country? He’s not a child. Do you still think you’re in your first year of high school?”

From Guk-soon’s perspective, she was worried about Jeong-o, while Jeong-o couldn’t understand Guk-soon’s view.

“Mom. Even if you understand and let things go like you do, it’s hard to be recognized as a virtuous person in today’s world. Do you know what they call someone with your personality? Sweet potato. They call you sweet potato.”

“How delicious sweet potatoes are! The younger generation is so spoiled. In my day, there were no sweet potatoes available.”

“Oh, Mom, you’re showing your age again. Old-fashioned, old-fashioned.”

“I’m the only one in the whole world being called old-fashioned.”

“Maybe you only meet people your own age.”

“Sigh. You never give in. I wonder who you take after.”

It was the usual bickering.

Guk-soon sighed and turned her head.

I want to be on your side, but I worry it will make your work life harder.

She nearly spoke up again but held her tongue, believing her daughter would handle it herself.

Ye-na poked Guk-soon.

“Grandma! It’s Grandma!”

“Hmm?”

“Mom looks like Grandma.”

With ice cream smeared all over her mouth, Ye-na beamed a bright smile.

“Mom looks like Grandma. I look like Mom, right?”

“Because of our puppy, Grandma can’t say anything.”

Guk-soon found Ye-na adorable and couldn’t help but smile weakly.

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After cleaning up the restaurant and putting the child to bed early, Jeong-o made an excuse about a promise and went outside.

He bought a bottle of soju and a bag of snacks and sat at a table in front of a convenience store.

It was a hard day to face his mom. He felt like crying.

“In my first year of high school, your mom went to our teacher and said, ‘Please look after my daughter. She was born without knowing who her dad is, but she’s never once been a burden to me.’”

The words Eun-bi had said earlier that day pierced through his heart like a nail.

It seemed that when his mom had to leave her job at the school cafeteria, she sought out the homeroom teacher, worried that her daughter would suffer because of it.

“There was no need for that. Why make me feel this way….”

Imagining his mom bowing her head because of him made his heart ache even though it was something from the past.

On top of that, he hadn’t expected to hear such a heartbreaking story in front of Jeong Ji-heon.

The shock was doubled.

He wished he could only feel sorry for his mom. That would be enough pain to deal with.

Why does my heart feel like this?

No matter how Ji-heon looked at him, whether with disdain or pity, it shouldn’t matter anymore.

It was unbearably humiliating to be in such a miserable state in front of Ji-heon.

Jeong-o downed some soju, wiping his tears away.

As he set the soju glass down and stared into the distance with blurry eyes, he noticed a man standing there, recognizing him.

Jeong-o also recognized the man.

They froze for a moment, each pointing at the other with their fingertips.

It was the kind-faced police officer who had escorted Ye-na when she had gotten lost on her way to the academy.

What was his name again? Kwon Bae-il, was it?

“Oh, hello, Officer. Are you on patrol?”

Jeong-o wiped his tears a bit more and greeted him.

“No, I’m on my way home after work.”

“It seems you live around here.”

“Yes.”

When the conversation paused, it seemed a bit awkward, and Bae-il was the first to ask a question.

“But, are you here alone?”

It was a question about whether she was drinking alone. Jeong-o wiped her nose and chuckled as she replied,

“Yes. It just turned out that way.”

Though she smiled, her eyes were still moist. Bae-il spoke seriously.

“If you ever need help, you can always contact the police…”

“Oh, yes. I understand. Thank you.”

At that moment, a tear dropped from Jeong-o’s large eyes. It touched her heart to receive concern from someone who knew nothing about her situation, just from looking at her face.

“Use this.”

Bae-il, flustered, quickly pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Jeong-o.

“Oh, I’m sorry. It’s not a big problem; it’s just that something unpleasant happened at work.”

“……”

“It’s just that seeing my mom is really hard today. You know those days, right? Don’t you have them?”

“I don’t have them, but… I can understand…”

As expected from a police officer, he had good citizen consultation skills.

Bae-il’s kind appearance and the security that came with being a police officer mixed with Jeong-o’s turbulent emotions, causing more tears to fall.

Eventually, Bae-il sat down in front of Jeong-o.

“Oh, I’m really sorry. Police officers also have long-term unsolved cases, you know. I have my own long-term unsolved case…”

Jeong-o tried to stop her tears by tilting her head back and blinking at the sky.

The sky in Seoul, where no stars could be seen.

She felt so foolish.

I have my mom, and I have Ye-na.

This place, where my family is, should be paradise, and I should be happy.

Why am I leaning on alcohol like a loser, whining?

Did I meet a pillar of the people, someone so reassuring just by existing?

“Living seems to be filled with suffering.”

Words flowed out alongside her tears, as if she had turned on a faucet she had tightly shut.

“When suffering piles on top of suffering, everything will collapse, but occasionally someone’s world sparkles with stars, and flower petals fall.”

Still, not wanting to be a burden anymore, she wiped her tears and managed to smile softly.

“So I can’t give up.”

Holding on tightly to this blurry life while waiting for that day.

It’s not just me.

This painful world is filled with amazing people.

I respect those who wipe their tears now to see moments when flower petals fall.

So I will overcome this. I can do it.

One day, I will surely see my own star shining.

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Even after separating Ji-heon from Jeong-o to avoid embarrassment, Eun-bi’s anxiety didn’t diminish.

She couldn’t forget the way Ji-heon had looked at her. That shocking moment lingered in her mind.

It was all Jeong-o’s fault. The thought that Jeong-o had ruined Ji-heon drove her to the brink of madness.

After work, Eun-bi headed straight to Ji-heon’s family home, Mrs. Jang Young-mi’s house.

She felt that if she did nothing, she would only drift further away from Ji-heon. She had to do something.

Though it was late at night, Young-mi welcomed Eun-bi like family.

“Eun-bi! Come on in!”

“Hello, Mother! How have you been?”

Young-mi took Eun-bi’s hands in hers and shook them warmly.

“I think you look younger!”

“Oh, come on, how can I look younger? You’re the one getting prettier every day, blossoming like a flower.”

Eun-bi really smiled like a flower at Young-mi’s compliment.

“How have you been?”

“I’m doing well. Just a lot of work.”

“Are you struggling because you keep taking on difficult tasks without finding an easier way? You and Ji-heon are in the same department; he should be helping you out.”

“I’m fine, Mother.”

When she had mentioned that she had taken on many important tasks in her team, Young-mi had responded positively. There was a sense of fulfillment in sharing information with her.

If only Ji-heon was at least half as kind as she was.

“How do you feel seeing Ji-heon’s face every day?”

“It’s nice. Just seeing him makes me happy. But, Mother, the truth is, we’re both so busy that we hardly run into each other. I thought we would see each other more often and have meals together since we work at the same company.”

Eun-bi said this with a slightly whiny voice, her tone softening.

“Plus, you know Ji-heon’s personality. I think he’s keeping his distance because we’re special to each other. He seems worried it might interfere with work. He’s really cold.”

“Ji-heon is the same with me. He never smiles, not at all. He’s just so wooden.”

“I should understand, I guess.”

“Right. But you have such a big heart. It’s because you’re there that he went to the advertising company. Of course, Seung-kyu is there too, but he moved to the department where you are because of you. So he relies on you to understand him.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Of course! What else could there be?”

Eun-bi felt her dark feelings wash away with Young-mi’s kind reassurance.

That’s right. Ji-heon came to our department thinking of me.

Thinking that way gave her a boost of energy.

“Eun-bi, how about I go on a date for you? I’ll take you out for delicious food and buy you some clothes. Let’s go shopping!”

“Then, Mother, how about this weekend? Sunday?”

“Sure! I think I had some plans, but I’ll clear my schedule for our Eun-bi.”

Eun-bi’s eyes sparkled with emotion, almost brimming with tears.

“You’re more like a mother to me.”

Feeling that she might burst into tears at any moment, Young-mi looked at her with admiration.

“If I had a daughter like our Eun-bi, I wouldn’t wish for anything more! Hurry up and get married. When a granddaughter who looks like you is born, I won’t have any more wishes left!”

“Wouldn’t you prefer a grandson who looks like my brother?”

“Oh, you say such lovely things. I like both, both!”

Hehehe.

Someday. Yes, someday.

Ji-heon and I will have a child. I need to gather strength thinking about that time.

It will be me who wins Ji-heon.

Ch35 - The Words "I Love You"

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Baek-il, who had quietly waited for Jeong-o’s tears to stop, eventually returned with more snacks from the convenience store.

“You seem to have a lot on your mind. Is it because of that cold case?” he said, pouring soju into his glass.

Jeong-o let out a deep sigh, finally calming her tears, and opened her mouth.

“The sea witch in The Little Mermaid… could actually be a sage.”

Baek-il blinked at the unexpected topic. As his gaze became dazed, he looked even more innocent.

“Do you know why the sea witch took away the Little Mermaid’s voice? Because if the Little Mermaid spoke just once, the sea would turn into a sea of blood.”

In a voice that was cold like a witch’s, Jeong-o explained, “If the Little Mermaid said, ‘I’m the Little Mermaid, and I lived in the sea with my father and sisters,’ what would happen? We would see a mermaid family in the aquarium within a year. The sea witch was protecting the safety of the sea world.”

Her voice, delivering the harsh reality, was solemn and serious.

I too have no choice but to remain silent for safety. I don’t know what impact the truth I’m holding will have on your family and mine.

Baek-il’s expression became contemplative.

It seemed Jeong-o’s absurd story had hit him quite seriously, so she gently cautioned him.

“Please don’t tell the kids this story. Let’s keep it between us.”

“Ah… yes.”

Baek-il replied clumsily, perfectly fitting his image.

Unloading her complaints to someone who didn’t know her situation was surprisingly effective.

After finishing an entire bottle of soju, she felt a bit lighter in heart.

She thought she could shake it all off and live well starting tomorrow.

Even though she was still afraid of running into Ji-heon.

“Thank you so much, Officer. You truly are the people’s support.”

Jeong-o gave a thumbs-up with both hands.

“Not at all. I’m glad to hear that I could help. Then take care.”

“Yes! You should head in too, Officer!”

Jeong-o bent down to bow to Baek-il, following his lead.

However, despite their spirited farewell, an awkward situation ensued.

Hahaha.

As they continued in the same direction, they would awkwardly smile when they saw each other, and again when they greeted each other.

After walking for a few more minutes, Jeong-o initiated a conversation.

“It seems we’re headed in the same direction.”

“Right. My house is across from that lemon laundromat over there.”

“Oh? Is it the six-story villa?”

“Yes.”

“I’m in the five-story villa next to it! We’re neighbors! It’s really reassuring to have a police officer as a neighbor!”

As Jeong-o expressed her delight, Baek-il eventually smiled too.

With a bright smile, he looked even more handsome. He must be quite popular at the police station.

Jeong-o couldn’t help but beam at Baek-il’s face.

“What do you do, Jeong-o?”

“I’m a copywriter.”

“Oh, that’s impressive.”

“I’m still struggling a lot in many areas, though.”

“Still, it’s remarkable. You’re raising a child on your own while working.”

“I get a lot of help from my mom. Oh, Officer, aren’t you married?”

“No. I live alone.”

“If you don’t have a girlfriend, I could help set you up.”

“No, it’s alright. I prefer being alone right now.”

Baek-il politely declined.

Well, there must be many others who make such proposals besides me.

Jeong-o decided to be satisfied with just having a police officer as a neighbor.

All in all, it was a pretty nice night.

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The next day.

Jeong-jiheon returned to the office late in the afternoon after going out for an external meeting, having gone in early that morning.

He had a lot to sort out before heading out, so he couldn't acknowledge Jeong-o when he spotted her in the morning. He planned to quietly find an opportunity to talk to her after he returned, but she was not at her desk.

"Where did Assistant Jeong-o go?" he asked Gi-hun, who was sitting next to her.

"She went to the studio for a radio advertisement recording today."

"When she comes back, please tell her to stop by my office."

"Sir, there's a product tasting event for Daewon Liquor today. Everyone will be moving there soon. Assistant Jeong-o will come straight over after her recording."

At Gi-hun's words, a weak sigh escaped from Ji-heon's lips.

He had remembered clearly until yesterday, but after hearing Jeong-o's shocking confession, his mind had gone blank.

He couldn't even understand what this feeling was.

He realized he did not resemble her father.

That's fine. He could understand the lies. After all, he didn't want to be seen as someone resembling her father.

But resembling her ex-boyfriend? Was that really true?

He learned that when he pretended to be her late father in front of her, she had called him “oppa” instead of “dad.”

“How much do I resemble him that she would mistake me for him even momentarily when she was drunk?”

No, had her thought process broken down entirely because of the alcohol?

Whatever it was, it felt bitter. He discovered that being told he resembled someone else wasn’t exactly pleasant.

Yet, the thought that if there were no such connection… he might be disconnected from her was anxious.

On the other hand, he was angry at that ex-boyfriend.

What kind of horrible thing had he done to make her cry so much all this time?

‘Please… he hasn’t passed away, has he?’

Recalling her tears, he couldn’t dismiss that possibility.

How should he ask about her ex-boyfriend?

How much should he ask without making her uncomfortable?

‘Wow… I never thought I’d have to deal with such concerns in my life.’

Because of Jeong-o. Because of me.

Despite feeling so troubled by all of this, Ji-heon hurriedly completed his work for the tasting. He then got into the car without being late.

As he traveled with his driver, his phone vibrated. Checking it, he saw it was his mother, Mrs. Jang Young-mi.

He ignored the first call. But he couldn’t ignore the second one. Ji-heon sighed deeply and answered the phone.

“Yes, Mom.”

[Are you busy, son?]
“Yes. I’m on my way to an event for the advertiser.”

His mother’s warm voice made his tone soften as well. But his expression remained cold and stiff, as it always was.

[Are you eating well? You’re not feeling unwell, are you?]
“Yes. I’m healthy. How about you?”

[Oh, my stomach isn’t well, so I’m struggling a bit. I can’t digest well even with a little stress.]
“Have you gone for a check-up? Make sure to take your medication regularly.”

[Yes. Thank you. Are you doing alright?]
“Same old, same old.”

[Yesterday, Eun-bi came over. She just had a cup of tea and went back, but I’m a bit worried. Is there something going on between you two?]

At the mention of Eun-bi, his expression tightened. After causing such a scene at the company, she had run off to his mother.

But he couldn’t discuss his relationship with Eun-bi with his mother right now.

It was frustrating that he couldn’t say a word properly because he was so worried about his mother’s health.

“…Right?”

“Yes. I’ll tell you soon.”

Since Young-mi and Eun-bi had been close for quite a long time, it would take a while to sort everything out. Ji-heon thought he would have to visit Young-mi someday.

[Mom feels uneasy when you say that.]
"……"

[Don't make it too hard on your mom and dad. Ji-heon, you know how I feel, right? They love you, you know?]
"Of course."

[Do you really know?]
"Of course. I love you too…"

To quickly end the call, he blurted out a confession that lacked sincerity.

Thanks to the cringeworthy love confession, the call was wrapped up fairly quickly. Ji-heon turned off his phone.

While three years' worth of memories felt like they had been cut away with scissors, many memories from long ago had resurfaced.

Was it when he was nine?

There was a friend Ji-heon wanted to get close to. He was cheerful, smart, and talented. They attended a Go genius class together at school, but after finding out that Ji-heon's mother was friends with that boy's mother, she made him stop attending the class.

"I heard his father isn't around. If you hang out with kids like that, you'll get bad influences."

Ji-heon couldn't understand what his mother meant by the "bad influences" from a kid without a father. So he protested a few times, but it didn't change the outcome.

"Your mom called my mom. She asked me not to play with you."

One day, the friend said this. Ji-heon had thrown a tantrum, and Mrs. Jang Young-mi had called his friend's mother directly.

That was the first time he hated his mother.

Young-mi looked at Ji-heon with a sympathetic expression, as if she thought he would understand someday.

"You shouldn't hate your mom. They all do it out of love for you."

To him, love was a tool for manipulation. Every moment of interference and separation came with the label of love attached to it.

"I love you."

That damned phrase "I love you."

Because of that, Ji-heon didn't want to attach the word love to his desires.

He started to hate the word "love," making it impossible for anything to become an object of love for him.

So, he had nothing precious.

"You don't have anything precious. Everyone who passed you by is insignificant to you."

His friend Seung-kyu's sharp remark was completely true.

Was that why? Was it because the memories from seven years ago, the memories from three cycles of the four seasons, had all vanished in a lump that he felt so indifferent?

Recalling the empty past made him feel nauseous.

Before long, the car turned onto a small road in Haengdang-dong. He had heard it was a unique pub near the university, but even the driver tilted his head, unfamiliar with the path.

Suddenly, Ji-heon felt a sharp pain in his head as he glanced out the window and ordered the driver to stop.

“Please drop me off here.”

“We still have a little way to go, sir.”

“I’ll walk from here. I have a headache.”

Ji-heon got out of the car.

As summer approached, the day was still bright even though it was past six o’clock.

Arriving too early for the tasting seemed a bit awkward, so it was a good choice to walk slowly. Ji-heon took out his phone to check his location.

While turning his phone back on, he glanced around. Although he didn’t know anything about the area, it felt oddly familiar. It wasn’t like he knew anyone in Haengdang-dong.

For some reason, he began walking according to his feelings, following his heart.

With every step, he felt the tasting moving further away, yet he couldn’t bring himself to give up. Wandering aimlessly, he suddenly snapped back to reality and realized he was in a strange place.

It was a studio apartment neighborhood near the university, filled with old villas stacked closely together.

“Why am I here?”

Just looking at the scenery around made his eyes ache and his heart race.

What on earth had he lost?

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Jeong-o had been outside all afternoon.

Team Leader Seong Mi-ran took good care of Jeong-o. Noticing something had happened to her the day before, Mi-ran made sure Jeong-o wouldn’t run into Ji-heon or Eun-bi.

Thanks to that, Jeong-o could spend the day listening to the sweet voices of voice actors in the recording studio.

In the evening, there was a tasting event for Daewon Liquor’s new products.

Since the recording ended earlier than expected, Jeong-o followed Mi-ran’s instructions and took the bus directly to the tasting venue instead of returning to the office. The tasting venue was close to the university Jeong-o graduated from, and the familiar bus route made her feel excited.

With plenty of time to spare, she stopped by the school and strolled around the campus.

It had been since her third year in college that Jeong-o had roamed the campus. After that, she took a long break and, upon returning, only attended online classes.

The end of her third year in college had been a bitter winter for Jeong-o.

Her body was gradually changing. There was a man who didn’t contact her at all.

After staying curled up inside the house for days, one day she finally went outside and walked aimlessly. It was during a time when the media was buzzing about unusual weather patterns.

Winter was definitely approaching, yet the trees were budding flowers as if they had forgotten the season. Seeing the wrongly bloomed flowers swayed her heart in that brief warmth, and Jeong-o cried her eyes out.

She was foolish enough to believe in love.

She had believed in a love she had never even expressed.

At that time, it was so painful that she wanted to die, yet seven years had passed so astonishingly.

“Now that past means nothing, huh, Jeong Ji-heon?”

As she left the campus and continued walking, she stumbled upon the house where she had lived a long time ago. A few new buildings had been constructed around it, but the apartment building where Jeong-o had lived remained unchanged. Seeing that building brought her an unexpected sense of joy.

Yearning for memories that hold no recollection,

she smiled gently while reminiscing about seven years ago.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed like a dull ache in her heart. It felt as if the morning sickness from that time was returning, and Jeong-o placed a hand on her chest, turning her head to find the source of the sensation.

Her eyes widened.

He was there.

A man whose eyes glowed red like the shimmering sunset of this season and moment stared at her in silent astonishment, mirroring her surprise.

“…What are you doing here, sir?”

Why are you here, how come you’re here…

Her eyelids swelled with transparency, capturing the scene of him standing there.

Her heart raced painfully, as if it were crying out for help.

Yet, overwhelmed, her lips could no longer move.

It felt like a reunion of those who had come to visit a grave.

You, who lost me, and I, who forgot you.

Ch36 - That Guy is You

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Jeong-o was quietly gazing at Jeong-ji when he finally reacted, as if buffering on an old smartphone.

“…The new product tasting.”

“…”

“Isn’t that why you’re here too?”

It felt like she was dreaming while still awake; somehow, she found herself in this place. She couldn’t confess that she had accidentally drifted here. She didn’t want to seem like a fool in front of this woman.

Jeong-ji turned to her with a blank expression, trying to ignore the déjà vu he felt in this unfamiliar neighborhood.

“That’s true, but why are you here?”

He had no way of knowing that Jeong-o was hoping for a specific answer.

“I got off early since it was a short distance.”

“…Why? Why here?”

“I said I’d walk because I felt cramped in the car, so the driver dropped me off here.”

Her eyes dimmed with disappointment at his nonchalant answer; it wasn’t the response she had hoped for.

“What brings you here, Jeong-o? The tasting venue is a bit far from here.”

“I attended a university nearby. I felt nostalgic, so I wanted to walk a bit.”

Her gaze appeared sad throughout their exchange. Jeong-ji concluded that she was still carrying the sorrow from the previous day.

He wanted to tell her that he didn’t care about her lie. He had from the beginning and still did.

“What about dinner?”

“Pardon?”

“Have you eaten?”

“No, not yet.”

“Shall we eat together? I haven’t eaten either.”

“Aren’t you going to the tasting event?”

Jeong-ji fell silent with a blank expression.

Since his original purpose was to see Jeong-o, the tasting event had already faded from his mind the moment they reunited.

Jeong-o glanced at him, slightly annoyed, and pulled out her phone. She didn’t know the exact location of the tasting venue either and thought it would be better to check the map.

After checking, she pointed to the right.

“You should go this way, sir.”

Though Jeong-o led the way, Jeong-ji didn’t follow. He stood there, pulling out his own phone.

After walking a few steps, Jeong-o stopped.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“Just a moment. I have a lot of messages coming in.”

Jeong-ji seemed to be texting someone.

Jeong-o had never seen someone’s thumbs move so quickly. His rapid thumb movements were noticeable even from a distance.

If one were to measure the age of his thumbs alone, they might guess he was in his teens.

But still, the wait felt long. He appeared very busy.

“If you’re busy, should I go ahead?”

“No.”

As he sighed and turned away, Jeong-o’s phone vibrated. His nimble thumbs had just completed their mission.

The name of Team Leader Seong Mi-ran appeared on Jeong-o’s phone screen.

“Hello, Team Leader.”

[Jeong-o, have you arrived at the tasting?] “I’m on my way.”

[Good. We might be a little late, so don’t go in without us.] “What? Why?”

[It was tough dealing with the clients alone last time. We can’t have that happen again. You can go grab a bite, have some tea, or even go home for a bit. We’ll take about an hour and a half. Got it?]

Mi-ran seemed to be in a hurry, quickly hanging up after relaying the information.

Jeong-o blinked at the screen after the call ended.

Jeong-ji approached.

“Was that Team Leader Seong Mi-ran?”

“Yes.”

“What did she say?”

“She said something came up and that the team would be late.”

“And?”

“She told me not to go into the tasting without them.”

Did Jeong-ji’s lips momentarily stretch slightly longer, or was it just her imagination?

“Then we should go grab something to eat. Let’s go.”

He said this while turning away, heading in the opposite direction of the tasting venue.

Jeong-o suddenly turned her feet in Jeong-ji’s direction but hesitated.

Should I follow?

The memories of yesterday made her heart ache. The face of Chae Eun-bi, who had pressed her for the truth, flickered in her mind.

“It seems like Chae Eun-bi thinks I’m hitting on that guy. Is it okay to have dinner together?”

It wasn’t even something she intended, yet she felt guilty.

But she had a special mission. She needed to gather information about Jeong Ji-heon and those around him.

Her mission was to thoroughly understand him, find out about the culprit in the Ye-Na kidnapping attempt seven years ago, uncover the secrets of their

phone call, ensure safety, and then reunite Ye-Na with Ji-heon. That was Jeong-o's mission.

There had been many moments she wanted to quit her job, but she held on tightly and worked hard, with that as her first reason.

Sometimes she struggled with whether to show Ye-Na to Ji-heon because she hated him so much, but still, she needed to properly observe his surroundings.

Right. This could be a good opportunity.

Perhaps it could be a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

With her fists clenched, Jeong-o followed Ji-heon.

By the way, Jeong Ji-heon has changed.

He didn't used to be so obsessed with food. He was someone who would give me his share of the meal.

Jeong-o quickly moved beside Ji-heon and asked,

"What are you planning to eat?"

"I'm searching for something right now. Do you have anything specific you want?"

"Do you like tonkatsu? There's a great tonkatsu place nearby."

Since we're at it, let's go somewhere familiar.

She recommended the tonkatsu restaurant they used to go to together long ago, remembering how he had enjoyed it even though he once claimed not to like it.

"Anything is fine."

At his reply, Jeong-o cheerfully led the way.

However, as soon as they entered the tonkatsu restaurant, Jeong-o felt her heart sink.

The interior had completely changed. It was as if nothing from seven years ago remained.

“Welcome!”

A part-time worker greeted them cheerfully. Jeong-o couldn’t turn away from the friendly greeting.

Carrying her mixed emotions, she stepped inside.

“Please take a seat, sir.”

Ji-heon followed her lead and settled into a seat.

As soon as she sat down, Jeong-o picked up the menu.

The menu hasn’t changed, has it? But she was shocked.

“The menu has changed too!”

They had completely revamped everything except for the restaurant’s name.

Just like Jeong Ji-heon. He’s still the same, but everything else has changed.

She let out a sigh without realizing it due to the disappointment.

Noticing her reaction, Ji-heon asked,

“Is there a problem? Should we go somewhere else?”

Jeong-o hesitated for a moment. But as she rolled her eyes around, she accidentally made eye contact with the cheerful part-time worker who was eagerly waiting for their order. She couldn’t just leave.

“No… let’s just give it a try…”

It felt like she was being punished for being greedy.

Perhaps because she didn’t have high expectations, the tonkatsu was much more delicious than Ji-heon had anticipated.

But what was even more satisfying was watching the woman in front of him expertly finish her tonkatsu.

He couldn’t understand why watching her eat felt so good. Every time she moved her mouth to chew, it felt as satisfying as if he were eating himself. He felt full even without eating.

“Sir, aren’t you eating? Is it not to your taste?”

Jeong-o, who had slowed down because he was watching her, found her words strange.

“No, it’s good.”

Noticing that she had eaten a fair amount, Ji-heon finally decided to bring up the matter he had prepared for a long time.

“You don’t have to worry about what Team Leader Chae Eun-bi said yesterday. I’m not worried about it either.”

The fork in her hand dropped as she heard his words.

“You don’t care about my lie?”

“I understand there were circumstances.”

“…”

“I hope this matter doesn’t hurt you, Jeong-o.”

Ji-heon had never consoled anyone before. Therefore, his current words of comfort and encouragement were the best he could offer.

However, Jeong-o felt melancholic for another reason.

“So he’s apologizing for what Eun-bi said yesterday…”

His gentle words of consolation felt like they represented Eun-bi, making her heart ache once more.

“It’s okay,” Jeong-o replied, forcing a smile.

“When your heart gets calloused, it doesn’t get hurt easily. Even if you poke it with a needle, the needle might break instead,” he continued.

“…”

“Talking about my dad doesn’t hurt me at all. He’s been absent since I was born.”

She wanted him to see her as a strong person.

“What about your ex-boyfriend?”

Jeong-o had tried to respond cheerfully, but he suddenly threw out an unexpected question.

Her smile faded in an instant.

How can he ask about my personal life so casually?

Let’s ignore it.

Not knowing how to answer, Jeong-o lowered her head and put some food in her mouth.

But he didn’t give up.

“Your ex-boyfriend.”

“…”

“Is he doing well?”

“…What do you mean?”

“I’m asking if he’s alive and well.”

Pfft.

This time, a laugh escaped her due to his odd question.

“Why do you want to know that?”

“I’m just curious. I heard he resembles me.”

He doesn’t resemble you; he’s just you.

The guy you’re asking about is you, Jeong Ji-heon!

She felt an urge to spill everything but suppressed it while thinking of Ye-Na’s face.

“Of course. I’m sure he’s doing great. He’s probably eating something delicious right now.”

Jeong-o spoke lightly, but Ji-heon was serious.

“I wish he wasn’t doing well, but it’s unfortunate.”

Puhuh.

Jeong-o covered her mouth at his expression.

She found it amusing how he spoke so casually about someone’s misfortune, unaware that he was bad-mouthing himself.

It made her feel a bit sorry for him too.

Jeong-o smiled like a Buddha and shared her true feelings.

“No, I hope he’s doing well. Truly.”

“…”

“I hope he’s doing well, but…”

“…”

“I hope that at night, when he’s super hungry and makes instant ramen, there isn’t any seaweed left. I hope he waits in line for an hour at a famous restaurant and gets cut off right in front of him. I hope he gets excited about winning the lottery only to find out he wrote down the wrong numbers.”

This was all her sincere wish.

I hope you’ve forgotten me, and I want you to live decently, but feel a bit empty too.

Even if you don’t think of me, even if you can’t.

“I hope that after working hard for three hours on a report, he forgets to save it and loses everything.”

“…”

“…No, two hours.”

She had said it seriously, but as an office worker, she felt that three hours was too excessive, so she slightly lowered her curse level.

For a moment, the corners of his eyes curved downward slightly.

Seeing him smile just like he did seven years ago made her expression freeze.

Ji-heon struggled to contain his laughter and tightened his lips. He never expected to meet a woman who could make serious topics so amusing and adorable.

In that moment, one of his arms reached out.

His large hand moved toward her without hesitation and gently brushed against her soft cheek. Even as his hand moved slowly, as if checking the texture of her skin, he didn’t realize what he was doing.

It felt like someone had grabbed his right hand and placed it against her cheek. No, it was as if something unconscious was controlling his hand and heart.

He was eager to touch her, but it felt like he had severed the thread of reason, making everything around him fade away. He realized how easily he could be captivated like this.

His body felt foreign, as if it wasn’t his own, and he was powerless before her.

But still, he had nothing to say.

His failure to pull his hand away despite knowing it was wrong was just his greed.

Ch37 - The Most Precious and Good Memory

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Jeong-o flinched.

She was captivated by the smile he had, which was just like seven years ago.

As she showed discomfort, Ji-heon quickly withdrew his hand.

The atmosphere in the restaurant became warmer.

She shouldn’t have brought up the topic of her ex-boyfriend.

She was afraid that continuing the conversation would lead to another blunder, so Jeong-o quickly shifted the subject.

“I’ve shared about myself, so now it’s your turn, Director.”

“…”

“I heard you had a car accident a few years ago.”

She cautiously opened the conversation. Ji-heon looked a bit surprised that she knew about his accident.

“It was seven years ago.”

“Were you badly hurt?”

“I was hurt quite a bit, but I’m completely healed now.”

“I heard you… lost your memory.”

That was a bold question, even for someone who was close to him.

Jeong-o felt tense, watching Ji-heon’s reaction, worried he might take offense.

As his eyes narrowed, she swallowed hard.

But for some reason, there seemed to be a hint of amusement in his gaze. It felt like he found her questioning intriguing.

“You seem to know a lot about me.”

“…I saw news articles about it.”

Under his probing gaze, Jeong-o fumbled for words.

“But my name wouldn’t have been in those articles.”

“…”

“Did you search for me out of curiosity?”

“No, it was my team leader who told me about it!”

Oh no… that was supposed to be a secret.

Jeong-o immediately scrunched her face and bowed her head. In her excitement, she had let slip something she shouldn’t have said.

With her hands clasped together and a pitiful tone, she pleaded without raising her head.

“…Please pretend you didn’t hear anything about the team leader.”

Ji-heon found her entire demeanor amusing.

After all, the car accident was his personal matter, and it was fascinating to see her show such serious interest in it. Moreover, he found it funny how she quickly got flustered when he turned the tables and questioned her.

“If I’m not careful, I might touch on something I shouldn’t.”

He felt that if he didn’t focus, he might repeat the earlier mistake.

Clenching his fist under the table, Ji-heon finally shared what she was curious about.

“I lost some memories, and my personality changed a bit.”

“…How much of your memory do you not recall?”

“Probably around three years’ worth, from when I was twenty-four to twenty-six.”

“…”

“There’s no need to look at me like that. Those memories probably weren’t useful anyway.”

He turned his head slightly, unable to bear her gaze.

He welcomed her interest, but he didn’t want her to look at him with pity. He didn’t want her sympathy.

“Most of my memories are likely from my military service, and even aside from that, my life must have been so dull that there wouldn’t be any memorable experiences to recall.”

“You don’t know that.”

Jeong-o lightly tried to downplay her concern, but she promptly countered his statement.

Her expression was serious, causing Ji-heon to fall silent.

“How do you know what’s a useless memory and what isn’t if you don’t even know what you’ve forgotten?”

It sounded almost like she was arguing.

Her reasoning was compelling enough to make Ji-heon ponder deeply.

After a long silence, she asked again.

“Have you ever tried to remember? You might have lent someone money without realizing it.”

“If I were owed money, they would have come looking for me by now.”

“But what if you were the one who lent money?”

“That’s just unavoidable. There’s no point in whining about it now.”

Whether he had borrowed money or lent it, it was all his concern. Ji-heon couldn’t understand why her face looked like she had lost money.

Before he knew it, time flew by, and it was well past seven o’clock.

“Let’s get going. If we leave now, we should get there just in time.”

Ji-heon stood up first.

As he walked away, Jeong-o felt a pang in her chest.

“He has no will to regain his memory!”

Still, she had gained some information about him.

He seemed to accept the fact that he had lost his memory without any particular emotion. He firmly believed that there wasn’t anything of significance to recall.

And she could also speculate that there likely wasn’t anyone around him trying to help him recover those memories.

Or perhaps someone was actively preventing him from remembering.

Jeong-o recalled the day she met his mother.

It was a brief encounter, but she clearly sensed that his mother harbored a strong dislike for her.

“Does she think the accident was my fault?”

Did that lead to Ji-heon trying even harder to erase his memories? To ensure he wouldn’t meet her again?

Despite the confusion swirling in her mind, Jeong-o felt a newfound determination from their conversation today.

She needed to find out more about his mother.

She would do whatever it took.

With her resolve ignited, Jeong-o exited the building.

As summer approached, the hot midday wind turned slightly cooler with the setting sun. The roses decorating the outer wall of the building couldn’t withstand the breeze and dropped their petals at Jeong-o’s feet.

She bent down absentmindedly to pick up a petal.

The vibrant red petal felt alive, reminiscent of Ye-na’s chubby little lips.

A memory of a late autumn day spent with her child surfaced.

“Mr. Jeong Ji-heon, that day Ye-na learned about the seasons at preschool.”

“Mom, this is autumn! Autumn has fallen!”

Ye-na pointed to a fallen leaf on the ground, declaring that autumn had come.

A single leaf represented the entire season of autumn.

She had been unable to share that beautiful moment with him.

There had been a time when she cried while looking at flowers blooming, forgetting the seasons.

Back then, the seasons that seemed to pass by slowly were now fleeting, like the leaf her child discovered.

Would she ever be able to share this story with him?

She heard Ji-heon descending the stairs.

Jeong-o purposely smiled.

“Mr. Jeong Ji-heon, you have to remember on your own.”

“I can’t keep pushing you. I don’t want you to think I’m intruding.”

“But if you come closer, I’ll be willing to take that step.”

“So please, don’t give up. Keep trying.”

“You can do it, Mr. Jeong Ji-heon.”

As Ji-heon finished paying and emerged from the building, Jeong-o, standing facing the wall, heard his footsteps and turned her body.

Her expression, previously blank, seemed to brighten into a refined smile. Ji-heon knew it was a practiced smile, but it was still lovely.

“Director, thank you for the meal.”

“Yes, it was good.”

Ji-heon nodded.

It had been a satisfying meal for him. He was relieved to see that she seemed to have bounced back from the previous day’s hurt and was glad she showed interest in his life.

Jeong-o took out her phone and said, “I’ll find the way to the tasting event.”

Then, she subtly added her feelings about the day.

“And Director, I hope you find your memories.”

“…”

“They can’t be useless memories. I believe they aren’t.”

Ji-heon’s eyes widened.

Comfort and encouragement had come to him in an unexpected form.

“They might be the most precious memories hidden deep within you, like a time capsule.”

“…”

“So precious that they are kept safe to avoid being harmed.”

Her voice wafted through the night air, caressing his head.

He felt a warmth rising in his eyes.

From time to time, he thought about it.

He felt there couldn’t possibly be anything valuable for someone like him, who was treated coldly by everyone. Yet still, perhaps…

“Maybe there’s something precious to me, after all.”

His mother had told him that it was an unimportant memory, that he shouldn’t be bound by the past, but still… maybe, just maybe…

“Just one might exist.”

He had only imagined it, never shared it with anyone. He never expected to hear such secretive words from someone else, especially from Lee Jeong-o.

Suddenly, her feet moved with purpose.

In that moment, she was intently focused on her phone, gauging the direction to the tasting event.

Her foot shifted sideways.

“Director, this way…”

Thud.

As she took a step, she stumbled right into his embrace.

He instinctively caught her as her head bumped against his chest.

Without realizing it, his hand cupped her face.

Even though he was holding her, it felt as if she was drawing him in. He lowered his head firmly.

He might have known this for a long time.

That someday, it would come to this.

Jeong-o had been so engrossed in finding directions on her phone that she ended up burying her head against his chest.

She felt embarrassed after offering such forward encouragement and bowed her head deeply.

Though she steadied herself quickly after he caught her, he suddenly brought her face closer.

It felt like a strong determination in his hand, as if he wanted her to look at him.

“No, no, mister! I didn’t come here to lean on you…”

Though she recognized that something was off, she felt a strange hesitation to move.

Thud, thud, thud, thud… Her heart was doing its job perfectly.

“This is ridiculous…”

It’s Been Seven Years

Despite the seven years that had passed, Jeong-o was surprised that she still remembered his touch.

She was even more astonished that he still caressed her in the same way.

Her body instinctively recalled that twisting away would only excite him further.

Could it be that this man hadn’t changed at all?

He was just as he had been seven years ago.

His unchanging agility, the way he seduced gently while still holding a strong grip that was hard to resist.

Even the habit of teasing her chin with his fingertips.

His gaze, filled with desire, interpreted every word and action in a sultry manner, as if he were intentionally creating a provocative situation, just like in those seven years ago.

A jolt of electricity coursed through her head as he lowered it, and an overwhelming heat surged in.

In that moment, she instinctively thrust her palm out.

Slap!

Her palm landed firmly on Ji-heon’s face, pushing him away.

“Jeong Ji-heon, you jerk!”

Reality hit her, and anger flared up.

Jeong-o didn’t stop there; she pushed him once more.

As he stumbled backward and sat down on the stairs, he let out a faint grunt of surprise.

Breathing heavily, Jeong-o confronted him.

“What are you doing right now?”

Since their lips hadn’t touched, he could easily deny it.

If it were someone inexperienced, they might think he was merely trying to support her as she stumbled, losing his own balance in the process.

But she knew. She knew. She knew…

She understood this man’s true nature, his habits, and that agility.

With narrowed eyes, Jeong-o demanded, “Did you do it or not?”

Her tone, usually used with Ye-na, slipped out as she treated him like a child who didn’t understand.

“Answer me. Did you do it or not?”

He might have tried to claim he wasn’t doing anything wrong, but he didn’t. Instead, he simply wrapped his hand around the jaw and lips she had slapped and remained silent.

“I’m going to give you some advice for your life.”

“…”

“You shouldn’t act that way with just anyone. You’re a man who could get married someday! Huh? Huh? Ugh!”

Cough, cough, cough, choke, choke.

As she pointed her finger at him in a fit of excitement, she inhaled a mouthful of stale air. The air scratched her throat, causing her to bend over and cough.

At the same time, Ji-heon’s eyebrows furrowed.

“…Who said I was getting married?”

Ch38 - Rumors of Marriage

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Jeong-o couldn’t hear Ji-heon’s voice as she was still coughing.

As Ji-heon stood up to check on her, she raised her hand to stop him and shouted, “Whoa! Don’t come over!”

“…”

“Don’t touch me.”

She warned him as if confronting a large beast, then ran off in the opposite direction.

Running aimlessly, she moved further away from the tasting venue.

But Jeong-o thought it would be better to take a different route.

Cheon Eun-bi would be at the tasting venue too; it wouldn’t do any good to create misunderstandings.

On the other hand, she was still feeling upset.

Her child’s father had such terrible habits.

If she had been just a few seconds later, he would have kissed her.

Now that she thought about it, he had also acted inappropriately during their meal. He had hesitated for a moment but had clearly brushed against her cheek, behaving as if something was on her face. She had remained quiet, but his attitude had definitely been strange.

‘He was definitely doing that on purpose during the last meeting too.’

She recalled the production meeting for the Daewon Spirits that had taken place two weeks ago. Ji-heon, who sat next to her at that time, had been unusually restless. After fidgeting, he dropped a pen on the floor and then covered her hand as she bent down to pick it up.

That too had been a part of his scheme.

‘I didn’t even realize he was this kind of man…’

She felt immensely grateful for Ye-na’s existence, which was entirely thanks to him, but she regretted having been so infatuated with him for a time.

If she had known his true nature earlier, it might have hurt a little less.

But there was no point in regretting it now. The past couldn’t be changed.

She had to be careful about the future.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

Seung-kyu was anxious.

As June 7, Monday, drew closer, he still hadn’t managed to persuade his friend.

Moreover, since he had brought up Jeong-o’s name in Ji-heon’s office, it seemed like something was going wrong with Cheon Eun-bi as well.

He felt too embarrassed to ask again about Monday’s plans.

‘Jeong Ji-heon isn’t the type to come back to this house to play with someone else’s kids…’

His children and his wife firmly believed Ji-heon would visit their home again on Monday, which only increased Seung-kyu’s anxiety.

“Oh dear….”

As he played with the kids, he was lost in thought when Jin-seo groaned, leaning against the bed.

“Today, Do-yoon didn’t take a nap. After wrestling with him all day, my whole body aches.”

Seung-kyu hurried over to Jin-seo and began to massage his shoulders.

Just then, the children flew out of the room with paper airplanes.

“Stop it. Go watch the kids.”

“They’re playing well.”

Seung-kyu glanced toward the living room and then returned to the massage.

He needed to tell his wife that he hadn’t been able to convince Ji-heon, and that he probably wouldn’t come on Monday.

“Hey, Jin-seo…”

Drrr…

In the midst of all this, Seung-kyu’s phone vibrated.

But wait, who could it be? His beloved friend, Jeong Ji-heon.

Seung-kyu quickly withdrew his hands from the massage and answered the call.

“Hey! What’s up, buddy?”

[There’s something I want to ask you about.]

Ji-heon’s voice sounded unusually drawn out.

“Sure, ask me anything.”

[Have you heard any rumors at the company that I’m getting married?]

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

[I heard there’s a rumor about me and Cheon Eun-bi getting married.]

Seung-kyu tilted his head in confusion. In fact, he hadn’t even been at Max Planning for a full year after transferring from another subsidiary of the Selaen Group. As someone in HR, he had heard more rumors than Ji-heon, but there were still limitations.

“I’ve heard people say you two are dating, but I haven’t heard anything about marriage.”

[Got it. Thanks.]

Ji-heon seemed in a hurry as he immediately hung up.

Seung-kyu stared blankly at the disconnected call.

Oh, this heartless friend. He just abruptly hangs up after saying his piece. Seung-kyu felt a surge of resentment toward Ji-heon today.

Just then, Jin-seo, who had been groaning on the bed for a few minutes, sat up and asked Seung-kyu.

“Honey, doesn’t something feel off?”

“What’s strange?”

“It’s too quiet.”

Agreeing with Jin-seo’s observation, Seung-kyu held his breath. The house was silent, as if the kids had escaped.

It was actually more reassuring when they were noisily playing around. A quiet house felt genuinely scary.

Seung-kyu and Jin-seo quickly dashed into the living room.

“Aaaah!”

In one corner of the living room, Do-bin, who was supposed to be with his younger brother Do-yoon, had spilled honey everywhere and was running away with a scream. Seeing his brother flee, Do-yoon followed suit.

The jar of honey had tipped over.

Sticky honey covered the children’s hands and feet.

The kids were running around, spreading honey all over the floor.

“Hey! Don’t run!”

Seung-kyu shouted, but it was no use.

“Stop running!”

“You’re going to scold us!”

Do-bin shot back as he ran away.

“If you did something wrong, you should get scolded! I said, don’t run, you brat!”

Still, Seung-kyu caught his son quickly.

“You little rascal!”

He lifted Do-bin and took him to the bathroom to wash his hands and feet while scolding him.

“I told you not to take anything from the kitchen, didn’t I?”

“But I asked for honey, and you didn’t give me any!”

“That doesn’t mean you can sneak and eat it! And then walk around stepping in it? Huh?”

Jin-seo immediately sent Do-yoon to the bathroom too. Seung-kyu made sure to wash him up nicely as well.

Jin-seo sighed sadly and started to clean up the chaotic living room.

With every step she took on the sticky floor, she felt her energy drain away.

Lately, she had been feeling inexplicably down.

There wasn’t a single quiet day in this house.

She had loved the sweet gazes of her favorite actors, but why did it feel so tragic when honey spilled in real life?

It was her own son’s doing.

Jin-seo spoke to Do-bin, who had just finished washing up.

“You’re not allowed to invite Ye-na on Monday.”

At Jin-seo’s severe decree, Seung-kyu’s eyes sparkled. Inside, he shouted, “Right on!”

It was a punishment that felt like the sky was falling for Do-bin.

“Mom! No!”

Do-bin, startled, knelt on the floor and clasped his hands toward Jin-seo in desperation.

“Mom, please! Just this once!”

As Jin-seo turned her head away, Do-bin clung to Seung-kyu.

“Dad! Mom said I can’t invite Ye-na. Dad! Dad!”

“I don’t know about that…”

As Seung-kyu evaded the issue, Do-bin burst into tears.

Seung-kyu just wanted to let it all slide. However…

“If you want to invite Ye-na, don’t cause any trouble, okay?”

The mother’s heart softened by her son’s tears, granting him leniency. Do-bin wiped his tears and answered loudly, “Okay!”

Seung-kyu’s shoulders drooped in defeat.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Jeong-o finally made her way around the path to reach the tasting venue. Walking quickly in her anger, she didn’t end up being late. The pub was located on the first and second floors of a building that hadn’t been there when she was in college.

Assistant Manager Park Young-gwang greeted her at the entrance.

“Did you come, Assistant Jeong? Have you had dinner?”

“I have. What about everyone else?”

“They’ll be here soon. Shall we go in?”

Jeong-o entered the pub with Park Young-gwang.

The spacious hall was piled high with cans of beer. Although it was a tasting event, it felt more like a party. Before drinking, Jeong-o glanced around.

Had Ji-heon arrived already?

As she looked around, Park Young-gwang gestured past the tower of beer cans.

The people from Production Team 1 were surrounding a man in a red tie. Team Leader Ahn Chan-seop looked somewhat flustered.

“Do you see that person, Assistant Jeong? The one holding two cans in one hand?”

“Yes. You mean the guy in the red tie?”

“Be careful.”

“…”

“He’s a very… erratic person.”

“Erratic?”

“He’s gone beyond being eccentric; he’s actually crazy.”

“Ah, that’s an interesting way to put it. Erratic.”

“I’m not joking. I mean it. Be careful.”

If even the respectable Park Young-gwang was calling someone crazy, she could only imagine how fierce this person must be.

Although Young-gwang had warned her, there was no way to avoid running into that erratic advertiser.

Standing next to the advertiser with a bored expression was Eun-bi, who called out to Jeong-o as she walked by.

“Assistant Jeong.”

“Yes?”

“Are you not going to greet him? He’s our advertiser.”

Oh, she had planned to greet him once everyone from their team arrived.

Reluctantly, Jeong-o approached the erratic advertiser. Fortunately, Park Young-gwang followed her.

“Manager, this is our new copywriter, Assistant Jeong O.”

“He’s the same age as me, but he’s still an assistant.”

“Oh, really? What were you doing while Manager Chae was getting promoted?”

Eun-bi’s blunt introduction drew a sarcastic response from the erratic advertiser. Jeong-o emptied her mind and managed to smile faintly.

“Hello, I’m Jeong O, a copywriter at Max Planning.”

“Are you married yet?”

“No.”

“Hmm. Then you can work even harder.”

The erratic advertiser filled a transparent cup with beer from the can and handed it to Jeong-o. He seemed intent on watching her drink it all.

Downing it in one go wasn’t difficult, but…

“If you drink this, it means you’re dating me~”

Jeong-o froze at his words as she lifted the cup.

Was he telling her to drink it or not?

Assistant Manager Park Young-gwang jumped in.

“Haha. Manager, aren’t you married?”

“Hey, Assistant Park. I can have a wife and a girlfriend separately, you know? With such a beautiful woman in front of me, how could I think of my wife?”

Ugh.

Inside, Jeong-o felt her teeth clench, but she forced a bitter smile and took a sip of the beer.

“Oh my, Assistant Jeong drinks quickly! I guess the manager must be charming!”

Eun-bi clapped and cheered. At Eun-bi’s words, the erratic advertiser’s face lit up.

Park Young-gwang snatched the cup from Jeong-o and drank it all.

“Since I drank it too, I guess the manager has to date me now. Hehe.”

“Hey, why are you doing this? I’m not interested in men.”

As the erratic advertiser’s voice grew louder, Assistant Park waved at Jeong-o to signal her to leave quickly.

Jeong-o read the room and stepped away, heading toward the nearby restroom.

After taking care of business and washing her hands, Eun-bi walked in.

Standing at the sink next to Jeong-o, Eun-bi looked in the mirror and said, “You two look good together.”

“I find that kind of comment unpleasant. Don’t say that to anyone, not even me.”

“Why? Isn’t it fine since he’s a married man? I thought you liked stealing other people’s men.”

Though Eun-bi’s words made Jeong-o feel wronged, she couldn’t snap back immediately because of what had happened an hour earlier.

Fortunately, Eun-bi’s phone rang loudly, preventing the pointless conversation from continuing.

“Oh? Mom?” Eun-bi exclaimed in surprise before answering.

“Yes. Have you had dinner?”

In a slightly higher, respectful tone, Eun-bi greeted her mother.

As Jeong-o was about to leave, she suddenly froze in place.

The person Eun-bi could address so respectfully as “mother” was somehow certain to be Ji-heon’s mother.

Her heart raced.

“I came to work. I have a liquor company among my clients. There’s a tasting event for a new product today.”

Jeong-o opened her bag and took out some cosmetics.

“You know I can’t drink. But since it’s work, I’m just going to taste it and head home early. I thought Ji-heon had left work early to come to the tasting event, but I haven’t seen him.”

As Jeong-o pretended to fix her makeup, the conversation continued.

“Did you talk to him? When?”

It seemed Eun-bi got along quite well with Ji-heon’s mother.

That made sense.

“Ah… did he say something like that? That he would tell me soon?”

But then, Eun-bi’s voice, which had been so bright and proud, suddenly darkened and grew softer.

Of course, that tone didn’t last long.

“I think he’s going to mention marriage. He had briefly hinted at it to me before.”

Eun-bi stretched her lips into a smile as she continued her phone conversation.

Marriage.

Even though it was something she already knew, Jeong-o felt a hidden piece of sandpaper somewhere deep in her heart, making her insides ache.

Ch39 - Welcoming Guests

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Friday morning.

Jeong-o was the first to wake up.

Yena, who had snuggled into her embrace and fallen asleep, had now wriggled out of the blanket and made her way to the door.

What kind of exciting dream was she having to wander all the way there? Jeong-o quietly smiled, wishing she could peek into her daughter’s dream.

Wrapping Yena back in the blanket, she laid her down again and left the room, heading to the kitchen to drink the honey water that Guksun had prepared.

The tasting event last night had gone well. The erratic advertiser had been a bit of a nuisance, but thanks to Assistant Manager Park Young-gwang and Team Leader Ahn Chan-seop, Jeong-o had come away unscathed.

Ji-heon, who had said he would go to the tasting, hadn’t shown up until the event was over.

Had something urgent come up all of a sudden?

Or was he too embarrassed to come because he had crossed a line?

Or maybe he was too hurt from getting hit by her to show up?

While she was a bit concerned, Jeong-o decided to shut those thoughts out.

There were more important matters at hand.

She had overheard Eun-bi's phone conversation. Since Eun-bi had been chatting right next to her in a way that seemed meant to be overheard, Jeong-o felt she hadn't done anything wrong.

Jeong-o was convinced that Eun-bi's conversation partner from yesterday was Mrs. Jang.

Ji-heon's mother, Mrs. Jang Yeong-mi.

It seemed that Chae Eun-bi and Mrs. Jang were quite close.

It made sense since they would become mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

But it seems the two don't share anything about me.

That, too, was understandable.

There was no need for Mrs. Jang to disclose her son's ex-girlfriend to a prospective daughter-in-law. If there was a problem, she would probably handle it herself. Or perhaps Ji-heon's other family members could have assisted Mrs. Jang.

For now, it would be best to consider Mrs. Jang as the center of this.

The mistaken phone call from seven years ago had likely been orchestrated by Mrs. Jang. And she might even know about Yena's existence.

It's possible that the attempted kidnapping of Yena was also part of Mrs. Jang's scheme.

Since Jeong-o had entered Ji-heon's company, perhaps it was a way to intimidate her so she couldn't approach him.

But if that's the case, why didn't she come forward herself and just use someone else? Direct communication would be much more effective.

And if Ji-heon and Chae Eun-bi's wedding was approaching, wouldn't that make it even more urgent? Being indirect would be far less effective than just telling her straight out.

There were so many puzzling points that she couldn't turn her speculation into certainty.

***

Ji-heon was holed up in his office all morning, continuously tapping away at the keyboard.

His head had been so foggy that he forgot about the group's monthly report scheduled for the afternoon.

He felt completely out of it.

In reality, he hadn't met Jeong-o many times, yet it felt like she was running around in his head like twelve different people.

And amidst all this, he still had work to do.

However, thanks to two hours of focused work, he managed to fill out a few pages of the report reasonably well. Ji-heon let out a long sigh and clicked the mouse.

Now he had to head to the headquarters.

How great would it be if he could just cancel everything, including the monthly report?

Do you want to save? Save. Don't save. Cancel.

Don't save. Click.

"Gah!"

Ji-heon jumped up in shock.

What on earth did I just do…?

Caught up in the desire to cancel all his plans, he accidentally clicked the “Don’t save” button!

He made a mistake that even elementary school kids wouldn’t make!

Ji-heon immediately reopened the document program to check his records. He regretted not setting up an auto-save feature in the past, which had been so irresponsible.

The two hours of hard work had gone to waste…

At that moment, the image of Lee Jeong-o from yesterday popped into Ji-heon’s mind.

“If all the materials I worked hard on for three hours got lost because I didn’t save them… No, two hours.”

The curses he had been muttering about Jeong-o’s ex-boyfriend flashed through Ji-heon’s head.

Why am I like this?

Grinding his teeth, Ji-heon opened a new document and set it to auto-save every five minutes.

He had to give up lunch.

Knock, knock.

As he adjusted his posture and stared at the monitor, he heard a knock.

“Yes.”

He shifted his gaze from the screen to the door.

The door opened, and Assistant Manager Jo Si-nae from the administrative office walked in. Si-nae flinched upon seeing Ji-heon’s expression.

Ah, I had called Assistant Manager Jo.

Ji-heon suddenly remembered that he had asked her to come to his office before lunchtime.

He slowly reacted and stood up.

“Please have a seat, Assistant Manager Jo.”

When Ji-heon invited her to sit, Si-nae, looking frightened, took a seat.

Ji-heon, sitting across from her, asked, “How’s the working environment?”

While he wanted to question why she would ask about the working environment when she had pushed him to the outskirts, Si-nae answered obediently.

“It’s fine.”

“I called you here today because I have a personal question for you.”

Ji-heon immediately stated his purpose.

“Have there been rumors in the company that I’m getting married?”

“I-I didn’t spread any rumors!”

Si-nae’s voice rose at Ji-heon’s question, her expression clearly showing her distress.

“I’m not interrogating you, Assistant Manager Jo; I just want to know something,” Ji-heon said in a calming tone.

After glancing around, Si-nae opened her mouth again.

“Well, it’s not that it’s a rumor, but everyone seems to know that you’re getting married to Manager Chae Eun-bi by the end of this year…”

“Then it must have been Manager Chae Eun-bi who mentioned it. How did you come to know?”

Ji-heon nodded briefly and asked again, his voice polite but his gaze sharp.

“I’d like you to tell me any personal information you’ve heard about me, as it comes to mind. Anything at all.”

***

Later in the afternoon, Jeong-o visited Ji-heon’s office.

Ji-heon’s secretary had contacted her, saying Ji-heon wanted her to bring the report from Daewon Liquor’s first briefing.

Jeong-o found it strange that he didn’t call her directly but sent the secretary instead. Moreover, when she arrived at the office, Ji-heon wasn’t there.

As she left the office, she asked, “Um, he’s not here. Did he really ask me to come?”

“Yes. He asked you to wait a bit. He’s on his way back from headquarters.”

“Then I’ll come back later.”

“He’s almost here, so please wait inside.”

Since the secretary’s insistence was firm, Jeong-o went back into the office.

What could he possibly want by calling her in? While waiting for Ji-heon, Jeong-o kicked the innocent sofa in frustration.

***

[“I casually asked Ji-heon if there was something going on with you two, and he said he’d talk about it soon. He said it in a really serious tone.”]
“Ah… Did he say that? He said he’d talk about it soon?”

[“Yeah. So I told him not to make Mom and Dad suffer too much. And he said he understood.”]
Eun-bi recalled her conversation with Mrs. Jang last night.

What could Ji-heon possibly want to tell his mother?

Although she had mumbled that he might be talking about marriage, she felt a growing sense of anxiety.

Since the day she uncovered Lee Jeong-o’s past, Eun-bi hadn’t been able to approach Ji-heon. He had kicked her out of his office as if he never wanted to see her again and hadn’t contacted her once.

Eun-bi felt so anxious that she couldn’t focus on her work.

In the meantime, after finishing the headquarters meeting and returning to the company, Ji-heon called out to Eun-bi.

“Chae Eun-bi, could I have a word with you?”

After a month since his transfer to Max Planning, he finally called her out in public. His voice was quite gentle.

“Yes!”

Eun-bi stood up from her seat, her face flushed with color.

She felt as if tears would burst forth any moment.

Just the other day, he had kicked her out of his office as if he never wanted to see her again.

“Of course. Your mother loves me so much; you can’t just treat me carelessly.”

It seemed like a good decision to visit Mrs. Jang and pour out her feelings.

***

After work, Eun-bi felt pleased that everything seemed to have been resolved, especially since Ji-heon must be grateful for her coming to his mother.

She followed Ji-heon closely, who walked at a brisk pace, forcing her to jog several times to keep up.

“Oppa, what’s going on?”

Eun-bi asked with a smile.

Ji-heon didn’t respond to her question; he simply continued moving toward his office.

The two arrived quickly at the office.

Click, the door opened and then closed.

Once inside, Ji-heon slowly turned his head to survey the surroundings, as if confirming that no one else was around.

Now that she thought about it, there was no secretary in the anteroom either.

Eun-bi’s heart raced. The man who had just kindly asked to see her moments ago was nowhere to be found.

Now, it was the original Ji-heon, expressionless and with piercing eyes. No, he looked even more intimidating than before.

Eun-bi felt a wave of fear wash over her.

“Why do I hear that you and I are getting married?”

At Ji-heon’s question, the smile Eun-bi had forced onto her face dropped immediately.

“Speak with your own words.”

“…”

“Did I ever ask you to marry me?”

His threatening tone left her speechless.

We’re bound to get married eventually! Everyone wants that!

She should confidently declare it, but it felt as if someone was squeezing her throat, making it difficult to speak.

“Still, we… someday…”

“Just the facts.”

“…”

“Just tell me the facts, Chae Eun-bi.”

“…”

“Did I ever propose to you?”

With Ji-heon pressing all the blame onto her, Eun-bi clenched her fists.

“…We were going to, someday.”

“Why would I?”

“…”

“You seem to be under a big misconception; I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“…”

“How terrible. If I hadn’t transferred to this company, you would have been prattling on about that nonsense even more excitedly.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend anyway.”

Eun-bi retorted sharply, stung by his deliberate attempt to insult her.

“Who cares who I marry when I don’t even have a girlfriend? Whether we’ve dated or not, I can get married and maintain a marriage just fine. Isn’t it easier for you?”

Once she found her voice, her words poured out like a flood.

“Oppa, don’t you remember? Seven years ago! If I hadn’t reported your hit-and-run accident, you would have died. What do you think would have happened to your mother if you died? That’s why we need to get married! You and your family should be grateful to me for saving your life.”

I’ll have to carry that gratitude in my heart forever!

“The one who should be grateful is you, but instead, I’m the only one who did well. I’m the only one who tried. Think about how well I treated your mother. Have you ever properly celebrated her birthday or Parents’ Day? I took care of all of that. I called every week, visited her, greeted her, took her shopping, and bought her gifts.”

He needed to engrave in his bones just how hard she had worked to maintain their relationship.

“I treated your beloved mother so well that you should only be thankful to me.”

“Do you know how high-maintenance your mother is when it comes to picking out gifts? Do you think you would have known about that struggle?”

“Then why go through that trouble? Did I ever ask you to?”

Feeling tears well up in her eyes at Ji-heon’s assessment of her generosity, Eun-bi felt her emotions surge.

“Why blame me for something you did out of your own liking? I never asked you for anything.”

“We agreed to date! That was a promise! If we agreed to date, then that means putting in effort! And I put in all this effort!”

“Chae Eun-bi.”

Even with tears glistening in her eyes and shouting in front of him, Ji-heon’s expression remained unchanged.

“Agreeing to date was just a way to quell the rumors from four years ago. You said that yourself, remember?”

As he calmed her down, his voice turned quiet.

Four years ago, Ji-heon had been particularly troubled by rumors. He didn’t know who was spreading them, but one day, his mother barged in, lamenting that she couldn’t take it anymore because of the rumors about her son.

Amid all that, Eun-bi had become the final victim of those rumors. As soon as she heard them, she came to him, lamenting like his mother, and by the time she left, she suggested that they create a real relationship.

Ji-heon had taken it nonchalantly. After that, miraculously, the rumors disappeared, and he thought it was a relief that he was no longer bothered by them.

He had thought it would end with a brief lie, but Eun-bi had held onto that act for a long time. Ji-heon realized that too late. If he hadn’t transferred to Max Planning, he would have remained oblivious forever.

And someday, he might actually be forced into marriage.

“You should have sorted that out after that, rather than creating more baseless rumors.”

“…”

“Just stop. Wrap it up within a week. I’ll overlook all your bravado and lies until now.”

Eun-bi shook her head vigorously at his demand.

“Oppa, you can’t treat me like this. Look at how I’ve treated you.”

“I’m grateful for the report from seven years ago. I’ll prepare a reward for you even now, so accept it.”

“…”

“I don’t care whether you say you dumped me or I dumped you; just settle this right away.”

Eventually, thick tears fell from Eun-bi’s reddened eyes.

Still, Ji-heon maintained his calm demeanor without wavering.

“If you’re embarrassed about lying to the people at the company, moving jobs wouldn’t be a bad option.”

“You’re going to regret this, Oppa.”

“Sure, I will. So let me stop regretting for a moment.”

His words and gaze were cold, but his tone was uncharacteristically gentle.

He opened the door to his office, which had been closed off.

“Time to go.”

“…”

“I have guests to entertain. Leave.”

Eun-bi clenched her fists and glared at Ji-heon before reluctantly leaving. She didn’t know what kind of guests were coming, but she couldn’t let them see her in this state.

As soon as Eun-bi left, the office door closed firmly behind her.

I’m going crazy!

Jeong-oh was hiding behind the sofa with both hands covering his mouth.

He had arrived at the office ten minutes ago. When he found no one there, he asked the secretary, who told him to wait inside.

Sitting on the sofa, he blankly stared at the floor. There were cookies on the table, as if they had been placed there just for him.

Feeling so bored, he opened the cookie packet. It tasted delicious, and his spirits lifted a little.

Why do I feel so comforted in front of food?

Should I eat one more since I’m bored?

The tasty cookies were a perfect snack for his hunger.

Just then, he heard footsteps outside. Normally, he would have stayed quiet.

“Oppa, what’s going on?”

It was Chae Eun-bi’s voice.

It was just like the other day. Once again, he found himself in the situation of facing Eun-bi and Ji-heon in the office.

And here I am, sneaking cookies!

For some reason, he didn’t want Eun-bi to catch him in this situation, especially with Ji-heon beside her.

Fidgeting, Jeong-oh quickly stuffed a cookie into his mouth and ducked behind the sofa.

Moments later, the door opened and closed, and a confrontation began.

To his surprise, he learned an unexpected secret about the two…

He never anticipated this. He didn’t expect such a situation to unfold.

He hadn’t imagined he would hear their history live and in person.

Though he wanted to jump up and run out of the office at any moment, the seriousness of their conversation forced him to hold his breath.

His heart raced like a fish flopping around in his chest as their argument continued.

“…You’re going to regret this, Oppa.”

Unable to counter Ji-heon’s momentum, Eun-bi finished her words and left the office.

Ji-heon seemed to remain there, unaffected.

What should I do now? How can I get out of here?

Feeling stuck in a predicament while eating cookies, Jeong-oh felt hopeless.

As he pondered how to escape, he suddenly heard Ji-heon’s voice.

“Guest.”

Jeong-oh jumped in surprise and looked up.

No way.

“If you’ve heard everything, shouldn’t you get up now?”

Ji-heon leaned over the back of the sofa, smiling at him.

“Did you understand everything properly?”

The smile looked both reassuring and sinister, leaving Jeong-oh unsure of how to respond.

Ch40 - Just Wait, Lee Jeong-oh

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Jeong-oh wanted to cry.

He felt like he had become thin as paper and wanted to escape through the crack under the office door.

“No, I….”

He hadn’t intended to eavesdrop on their conversation; it was just his pride that made him want to avoid showing this side of himself to Chae Eun-bi. But now he couldn’t honestly admit that.

“Since you almost made a mistake with me yesterday, can we just let this slide?”

If he could just escape from here, he felt like he could shake off the chaos from yesterday.

“I really didn’t eavesdrop on purpose…”

“I know.”

Ji-heon walked around the sofa and knelt in front of her, bringing their eye levels closer.

Jeong-oh didn’t want to have a conversation with Ji-heon, so he kept his head down.

“I was trying to recreate the situation from Wednesday, but thinking about it, this is even better.”

“…”

“Because when you’re hiding, the truth is easier to see.”

Jeong-oh felt ashamed to hear his voice and wanted to cover his ears, but he hesitated as he brought his hands up to the sides of his head.

He slowly lifted his gaze to look at Ji-heon.

He was smiling at him.

What did he just say?

“…Are you saying you were trying to tell me the truth?”

Ji-heon nodded.

“Why? Why?”

“Because I’m concerned about what you’re misunderstanding.”

“…”

“There’s no one I’m going to marry. Not yet.”

Calm down, heart.

It was fear, not excitement.

The man who had been pouring out cold words to others only moments ago was now smiling kindly at him, causing a fluttering feeling inside.

“Yes, yes. I got it…”

Jeong-oh cautiously stood up. He couldn’t be alone with this man any longer.

“So, you called me not for work but because of a misunderstanding? Can I leave now since we cleared it up?”

Step by step, Jeong-oh distanced himself from Ji-heon, moving cautiously, until he finally opened the door with a click.

As the door opened, Ji-heon watched her hurriedly leave the office, just like the night before in front of the pork cutlet restaurant.

Ji-heon gazed blankly at the door that had swung shut.

It was good that they had settled last night's mistake, but beyond that, it felt ambiguous whether it had truly resolved anything.

Even after telling Jeong-oh the truth, he felt an uneasy discomfort that perhaps the misunderstanding hadn't been fully cleared up.

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This is so difficult. Lee Jeong-oh.

What's going on? What's all this?

Jeong-oh muttered to himself as he hurried away from Ji-heon.

He finally understood the situation.

Chae Eun-bi and Jeong Ji-heon had been in a fake relationship for a long time. Eun-bi had been obsessed with the relationship, and the marriage plans were also a fabrication of hers.

He had misunderstood so much. It was no wonder.

It was all orchestrated by Eun-bi!

"Assistant, where have you been? Is everything okay?"

Gi-hoon asked, looking at Jeong-oh, who had just returned from Ji-heon's office, breathing heavily as if he had just completed a 100-meter sprint.

"No, no, no. It's nothing."

“Then why are you covering your mouth? Did you eat something alone?”

“No, no, no. I didn’t eat.”

Of course, he had eaten two cookies, but that wasn’t why he was covering his mouth.

He was worried his lips would move against his intentions.

He felt like he couldn’t control his expression.

He was just so shocked. So shocked.

Sitting down and finally managing to catch his breath, Jeong-oh tried to organize the conversations he had overheard in the office in his mind.

So, the two of them started dating, or rather, pretending to date because of the rumors from four years ago?

He didn’t know what the rumors from four years ago were, but in any case, their relationship had been fake.

Jeong Ji-heon hadn’t invested much emotion into that fake relationship, allowing four years to pass. Meanwhile, Eun-bi had been working hard to impress Ji-heon’s mother.

Ji-heon’s mother liked Eun-bi, which led Eun-bi to believe she would eventually marry Ji-heon…

Because Ji-heon had no woman!

Can I understand it this way?

After organizing his thoughts as he remembered, his heart began to race again. He didn’t know why. He shouldn’t feel excitement for Ji-heon anymore. He shouldn’t.

Perhaps it was because the day he would meet Ye-na was approaching rapidly. That must be it…

Jeong-oh stood up and looked over at Eun-bi’s desk. Everyone from Production Team 1 was present, but Eun-bi’s seat was empty.

He tried to calm his racing heart while recalling the unease that still lingered.

Knowing the true nature of Ji-heon and Eun-bi’s relationship didn’t guarantee his child’s safety.

He still didn’t know anything about his mother, Mrs. Jang Young-mi.

The phone call from seven years ago must have been related to her, and unless he understood the immense influence she had over him, he couldn’t act recklessly.

It was highly likely that Mrs. Jang liked Eun-bi, which meant Ji-heon hadn’t been able to honestly tell his mother about their fake relationship. This suggested that Ji-heon valued his mother’s opinion.

Who wouldn’t find their mother important?

He had a feeling he might have to confront his mother, Jang Young-mi, someday.

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Saturday afternoon.

Jeong-oh had to go to work today because he was busy preparing for a competitive presentation. As he got ready, Ye-na, who was watching him intently, said,

“Mom, Do-bin is going camping with you, Dad, and Do-yun.”

Jeong-oh bent down to meet Ye-na’s gaze and asked, “Do you want to go camping too, Ye-na?”

“No. I just wanted to say that. You’re busy, right?”

The child should be more childlike. Sometimes it was sad to see her hiding her true feelings with such maturity.

“Even if I’m busy, I can still go. Summer is too hot, so let’s go in the fall.”

Ye-na’s face brightened at Jeong-oh’s promise.

“Mom, can I tell Do-bin?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Call him!”

She seemed unable to wait even a moment. Jeong-oh reluctantly called Do-bin’s mom, Jin-seo.

[Yes, Ye-na’s mom!] Jin-seo answered the phone in a warm voice.

“Hello, Do-bin’s mom. I’m calling because Ye-na has something to say to Do-bin.”

[Oh, really? Yes, I’ll get Do-bin for you.] Jeong-oh handed the phone to Ye-na.

Holding the phone to her ear, Ye-na cheerfully shouted, “Hello. Park Do-bin!”

[Ye-na, I’m sorry.] But before Ye-na could say what she wanted, Do-bin immediately apologized.

“Why?”

[Actually, you know… my dad said he can’t share. Mom said it wouldn’t work.] This was the matter that had been bothering Do-bin for a few days. Jin-seo had said there was no need to bring it up again, but it was a significant issue for Do-bin.

Jeong-oh could hear Jin-seo calling out, “Park Do-bin!” urgently from the other end of the line.

Ye-na blinked, surprised by what was happening, but then recalled a conversation from the previous Tuesday and casually responded.

“Oh, it’s okay.”

“Aren’t you mad?”

“No. I thought it wouldn’t work out anyway. But you know what? I’m going camping too! In the fall!”

“Really? Did you know that if my dad becomes your dad, we can’t get married?”

“Huh?”

The children were each trying to get their point across while diligently continuing their conversation.

However, when the topic of marriage came up, the phone quickly passed back to Jin-seo.

[Ye-na, hi! Hi! Do-bin is saying all sorts of strange things. Is your mom next to you?] “Yes. Just a second.”

Ye-na immediately handed the phone back to Jeong-oh.

“Hello.”

[Ye-na’s mom, haha… Our Do-bin has a lot of shortcomings. Thank you for letting him be friends with Ye-na.] Jin-seo’s laughter, trying to ease the awkwardness, was followed by the usual expression of gratitude.

“No, thank you. I really appreciate it too.”

[Then I’ll see you on Monday. Please tell Ye-na I’ll see her then.] Jin-seo politely said goodbye and hung up.

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After the call, Jeong-oh asked Ye-na, “What did Do-bin say sorry for?”

“Do-bin said he would share his dad with me. But he can’t.”

“He said he would share his dad?”

Jeong-oh felt a sharp pain in her chest, surprised by the children’s conversation.

“I didn’t ask for that.”

Ye-na retorted sulkily.

How did such a conversation even come up?

Thinking about how the child felt about accepting that casually made it hard for Jeong-oh to smile.

With a heavy heart, she continued getting ready when her phone vibrated.

The studio had sent the radio ad work. Although they had finished up to five drafts, one was missing. Jeong-oh asked the PD, but he couldn’t remember properly.

Now, Jeong-oh was in a rush to send another email. To do that, she needed to use the company computer.

“Has Gi-hoon come in yet?”

Jeong-oh quickly called Gi-hoon. However, he didn’t answer. Knowing that Gi-hoon sometimes silences his phone, she called his office again.

After a long wait, the hold music stopped, and a male voice answered.

[Yes.] “Gi-hoon, have you come in? Sorry, but could you turn on my computer and send me some data? I need to send an email to the studio right away. The password is…”

[I’m Lee Jeong-oh’s assistant?] Gasp!

Hearing just that short “yes” response, Jeong-oh had mistakenly thought she was speaking with the same team member, Song Gi-hoon, and was asking him for a favor. But it turned out to be Jeong Ji-heon.

This was a disaster.

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It had been a long time since she had to work on the weekend.

The production team had worked late into the night yesterday, so they would probably come in in the afternoon.

Ji-heon, as usual, checked the desk of Jeong-oh from Production Team 2 and was about to move to his office when he hesitated.

The phone rang in Production Team 2.

It was at the desk next to Jeong-oh’s, where Song Gi-hoon sat. With no one around to pick up, Ji-heon answered the call.

“Yes.”

[Gi-hoon, are you at work? Sorry, but could you turn on my computer and send me a file?] It was none other than Lee Jeong-oh. After a short response, Ji-heon, feeling the urgency in Jeong-oh’s voice, started to relay the request without even confirming whose voice it was.

[Please send the email to the studio right away. The password is…] “Lee Jeong-oh?”

At Ji-heon’s question, he heard a gasp from the other end.

Even that sound made Ji-heon’s heart flutter.

Suppressing a smile, he asked in a serious tone, “What’s the matter? Is something wrong?”

[Yes. There’s a missing file from the studio. I need to resend the email urgently…] Ji-heon immediately hung up the call from Gi-hoon’s desk and dialed Jeong-oh again on his mobile.

[Hello…] Unlike before, Jeong-oh answered with a defeated voice.

“I’ve come to Lee Jeong-oh’s desk. Just tell me the password, and I’ll take care of it.”

[No, no, no, no, no, it’s fine. I’ll get there quickly. I’ll arrive within an hour.] Jeong-oh insisted in a panic.

“But you said it was urgent.”

[No, no, it’s okay. I can do it.] “I know how to send emails too, so just tell me. It’s fine.”

[No, no, no… The password is personal information, so I can’t give it to you!] According to Max Planning’s regulations, the password couldn’t be classified as personal information. In cases where an employee faced unexpected issues and couldn’t access their assigned PC, the company had provisions to retrieve information at its discretion.

For this reason, the company also advised employees not to set the same passwords for personal and work accounts, but it seemed Jeong-oh wasn’t aware of this.

“Weren’t you going to tell Song Gi-hoon the password?”

Ji-heon felt a twinge of irritation. With Jo Si-nae absent, he even considered sending Gi-hoon to the adjacent team, but he took a deep breath and tried to persuade her.

“I’m sorry it turned out this way. Just tell me the password; I promise I won’t remember it.”

After another long sigh, she reluctantly started to recite the English consonants one by one.

“…W, J, D, D, L, T, K, R, T…”

Ji-heon turned on the PC and typed the letters as she had pronounced them.

wjddltkrt.

Soon, the computer desktop appeared. Ji-heon immediately opened the email inbox.

“It’s opened. What should I send?”

[Please resend the email I sent to Odi Studio.] “I sent it.”

It was a very simple task. After completing the transmission, Ji-heon smiled with satisfaction.

A voice of thanks came from the other end.

[Yes. Thank you!] But that was it.

As the call abruptly ended, Ji-heon let out another sigh.

A woman who wouldn’t move even a little according to my wishes.

Why am I so fixated on someone like her?

He couldn’t understand himself, but he didn’t dislike being focused on her.

Chuckling to himself, Ji-heon got up from his seat, but then hesitated when he reached for the computer’s power button.

Something felt off.

What was this unsettling feeling?

Sitting back down, Ji-heon opened a notepad on the computer and typed the English consonants Jeong-oh had pronounced in Korean.

wjddltkrt.

Checking the screen, a bemused laugh escaped Ji-heon’s lips.

“Hah.”

– Jeong is a (abbreviation for ‘leader’).

Just you wait, Lee Jeong-oh.

Ch41 - Can We Be Friends?

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Upon arriving at the office, Jeong-oh continuously scanned the surroundings, ready to flee at the sight of Ji-heon.

Fortunately, Ji-heon was nowhere to be found.

‘He’s a busy person, so he probably won’t be here on the weekend. By Monday, he’ll likely have forgotten all about today,’ Jeong-oh thought, shutting the door on her anxiety as she headed toward the meeting room.

There were several cups of coffee from a well-known coffee chain on the meeting room table.

Park Yeong-gwang, who had entered the meeting room first, said, “Lee, choose whatever you want to drink.”

“Is this on you, Team Leader?”

“No, it’s from the Director.”

Jeong-oh almost dropped the iced Americano she had picked up.

Yeong-gwang took a sip of his coffee and continued, “At first, I was a bit scared, but the Director seems to take really good care of the staff.”

“Really? I didn’t notice that.”

“That’s not true. At the last tasting event, he personally contacted me to make sure you wouldn’t be harassed by that difficult advertiser. That’s why I stuck close to you.”

Ah.

Realizing this unexpected fact felt like biting into ice, making her head tingle. From the time they had met in front of her old house, to the request he made of Yeong-gwang, to how he handled things after receiving her call, and now this coffee—it felt as if Ji-heon had been watching her from somewhere all along.

No matter how much she tried to escape, she felt as if she were firmly within his grasp. Jeong-oh set the Americano she had been holding back down on the table.

One by one, the team members arrived, and the competitive PT production meeting began.

Before long, the competitive PT was just ten days away. Instead of Jo Si-nae, who had been expelled from the production team, Ko Eun-joo had joined the team. Jeong-oh felt reassured by the fact that her allies had increased.

Today, for some reason, Chae Eun-bi was absent, making the meeting easier.

In meetings where Eun-bi participated, her opinions often drew subtle disapproval. She would likely follow up the next day, critiquing everything Jeong-oh had suggested, but for now, things were comfortable.

“Since we’ve discussed a lot today, shall we wrap it up? Let’s enjoy Saturday evening like it should be and reconvene tomorrow.”

“Sure!”

At Mi-ran’s words, the team members cheered. Jeong-oh, who had contributed many ideas, stood up with a sense of pride.

Just then, the studio sent over the revised work. If she could just check it quickly and head home, she would have the perfect opportunity for a cozy family dinner.

As Jeong-oh settled back into her seat, Gi-hoon spoke up.

“Are you not heading out, Team Leader? I drove today, so I can give you a ride.”

“No, I need to check on one piece of work first. You go ahead.”

“Okay, then. I’ll take off.”

One by one, the others said their goodbyes, and soon Jeong-oh was left alone.

Currently, her team was the only one in the main office for the competitive PT, so there were no other people around. Sitting alone in the office felt a bit eerie.

‘I should wrap this up quickly and leave.’

Since it was just a matter of comparing the script with the work, it wasn’t difficult; it just took time. After finishing the review, Jeong-oh also soon got up from her seat.

And then, across the room, her eyes met Ji-heon’s as he stood quietly.

‘Oh no, this is bad.’

He was at the office.

Feeling the weight of his gaze, Jeong-oh became tense, as if being punished by his stare.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” he asked as he approached her, his voice low. The moment had finally arrived.

Jeong-oh was startled internally but didn’t show it. He continued teasing her.

“Your password is quite unique, especially the ‘gyeok’ and ‘siot’ sounds.”

She had said she would let it go, but here they were.

The food she had eaten for breakfast and lunch felt like it was coming back to haunt her. Her face was turning red, but he paid no mind as he continued to poke fun at her.

“And you were going to share that with Song Gi-hoon.”

Feigning innocence, Jeong-oh responded playfully, “The ‘gyeok’ and ‘siot’ mean ‘thank you.’ You know that, right? Even unconsciously, I’m grateful to the Director…”

“What are you thanking me for?”

“There are so many reasons to be grateful. I’m always thankful. I really appreciate you helping me with today’s tasks.”

At Jeong-oh’s twisted logic, Ji-heon let out an amused chuckle.

Still, she was entertaining.

Ji-heon spent his time in the office, waiting for the hours to pass.

After he had pointed out that having Jeong-oh nearby decreased the staff’s efficiency, she had been careful about attending meetings. Instead, she decided to receive only the end-time reports without attending.

He visited her right after the meeting ended. While everyone else was leaving the company, Jeong-oh seemed to have work to do and returned to her seat.

For about ten minutes, he watched her intently as she immersed herself in her tasks. Just watching her was oddly satisfying. For Ji-heon, who had always thought of work as a nuisance, this was a refreshing sight.

He couldn’t understand why he felt this way about a woman who did nothing for him.

With a smile, Ji-heon asked, “If you’re that thankful, shouldn’t you buy me a meal or something?”

“Sure. Just let me know when you want to eat something delicious, and I’ll come to pay for it.”

“Who asked you to pay for it?”

She was unpredictable, didn’t move according to his wishes, and felt like someone who toyed with him. Yet, there was something enjoyable about watching her.

“Enough with the jokes.”

“…….”

“Let’s go. I’ll treat you to something good.”

He wanted to see her enjoying a meal again.

After a brief notice, he moved first.

Jeong-oh stood there in a daze, watching Ji-heon.

She had expected him to scold her, but he was inviting her to dinner.

Was he planning to take revenge with food? Was he plotting to feed her something inedible?

She couldn’t grasp his intentions. In a hurry, she chased after him, saying, “I’m planning to have dinner with my mom, so I’ll be going home early. I’m sorry.”

“Then I’ll give you a ride home.”

Home? He was offering to take her home?

To the house where her mom and Ye-na were?

If she happened to run into Ye-na on the way back from the playground, that would be a disaster.

‘Still, he’s offering a ride, so I might as well take it. I can just get off somewhere a bit further from home.’

Though it felt awkward, Jeong-oh quickly steadied her resolve, recalling her mission.

Maintaining a comfortable distance from him while learning more about him was usually not easy.

But that didn’t mean she could just sulk.

I know you.

I only know a fragment of you from seven years ago, from when I met you back then, but that you could be a clue.

She could move carefully, calculating how he would react to her actions.

It felt like stepping onto a slippery surface where she couldn’t tell if it was water or ice, but Jeong-oh decided to embrace her fate.

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“Do you live alone with your mother?”

Ji-heon asked as the car drove down the road.

Jeong-oh wiggled her fingers for a moment before slowly answering, “Yes.”

Her heart raced when she had to lie.

“Isn’t it uncomfortable living with your mother?” he asked.

“No, I’m like a soulmate with my mom,” she replied.

His gaze flickered towards her for a moment before staring straight ahead.

“What about you?” she asked.

“What about me?”

“Aren’t you close with your mother?”

This time, she threw the question back at him. While waiting for his response, Jeong-oh’s lips felt dry.

“It’s been a while since I lived apart from her.”

“So does that mean your mother is uncomfortable?”

“Because I’m more comfortable alone.”

“It’s not that you don’t like her?”

She sounded serious, causing Ji-heon to let out a small laugh, as if he found her question absurd.

Quick to pick up on the moment, Jeong-oh changed the subject. “But you still care for her, right?”

“I respect her, in many ways.”

Jeong-oh nodded slowly.

She wondered if questioning familial bonds was unnecessary. If there was even a slight rift between him and his mother, wanting to pry into it felt wrong.

But if not, how could she get to the truth?

Could she approach this man again?

Everything about him had changed to the point that if it weren’t for his looks, she might have thought he was someone else entirely.

Could she find a way back into his heart?

As she pondered, Ji-heon’s car arrived in the neighborhood.

“Which way from here?” he asked as he turned into an alley in front of a convenience store.

“Oh, please stop here!” Jeong-oh exclaimed urgently.

When Ji-heon parked the car, she hurriedly got out.

“Just a moment. I’ll be right back,” she said, rushing into the convenience store.

Inside, she quickly grabbed a few items.

Barley tea and gum, which she had left in his car seven years ago. And candy that she had once put in his pocket.

After completing her purchase, Jeong-oh rushed out of the store.

By then, Ji-heon had gotten out of the car and was standing blankly in the direction she had gone. When he spotted her, he approached.

Jeong-oh handed him the items she had bought at the convenience store.

“I got water in case you’re thirsty, and gum and candy for when you feel sleepy. Thank you for the ride,” she said.

Remember me.

And today, please just go back.

Ji-heon frowned slightly at the gifts she presented, his expression seeming like an effort to recall something, causing Jeong-oh’s heart to flutter.

She needed to get closer to him. They had to become more than just a superior and subordinate.

But it couldn’t be too obvious.

Could she learn about him without revealing herself entirely?

Without anyone finding out? Not even Ye-na’s existence?

‘Could we be friends?’

Slowly building trust, I would eventually have to reveal the truth.

I needed to have the strength to stand against his mother.

I would have to tell him that I had met his mother, that I had spoken to someone impersonating him seven years ago. I needed to uncover all the facts and make him believe me.

Could I do it? Did I have that kind of strength?

Thinking about the future filled her with fear. But still, she had to take that first step.

“Director, I’m actually quite good at counseling,” she said, cautiously taking a step toward him.

“If you have a difficult problem, I can listen. For example, if there’s conflict with someone, if work is hard, or if you just want to talk to someone for no particular reason.”

“…”

“I can be your friend.”

Not wanting to be too obvious…

She approached him with a fervent wish, almost like a chant, but his gaze felt sharp as if he could see through her. Jeong-oh flinched, worried that he might find her approach unpleasant.

“It might be a bit uncomfortable for you since I’m younger and just your subordinate, but having a friend who’s younger is a good thing. You might even feel a little younger yourself,” she added.

“…”

“It’s not about being a romantic friend; I can be a friend who gives you honest and tough advice.”

The silence between them felt precarious.

After a long pause, he finally spoke.

“Tough advice.”

“…”

“That’s nice.”

He said with a crooked smile.

“Friend.”

“…”

“Sure. Why not? Friend.”

His words, spoken in short bursts, seemed to carry no unhealthy implications, yet they somehow felt inappropriate.

Jeong-oh forced herself to ignore that discomfort and nodded boldly.

“Yes. Friend.”

Maybe right now, she was walking into a tiger’s den.

If she was going to enter the tiger’s den, she needed to be fully armed to catch the tiger.

“Let’s keep our friendship a secret for now. Eun-bi keeps misunderstanding things, and that’s too bothersome.”

Would he really keep this promise? That would be the first test.

Jeong-oh extended her hand for a handshake.

Ji-heon found her determined expression amusing.

As he tried to approach her directly, he was entertained by her audacity in drawing a line by calling him a friend. It was surprising to see the woman who had been perpetually tense and seemingly angry in front of him gradually come closer.

It felt as if she was placing him, someone twice her size, onto the palm of her hand and squeezing him tightly.

Ji-heon firmly grasped her outstretched hand.

Even if it was a trap, he wore an expression that indicated he was willing to step right into it.

Her palm conveyed his warm body heat.

It was just a handshake.

Why did it already feel like she was caught when she was supposed to catch the tiger?

Just when she thought they would shake hands, he suddenly raised her hand, making Jeong-oh’s eyes widen.

His lips stamped onto her hand like a brand of their new relationship.

Touch.

Gasp!

Her face flushed instantly. Jeong-oh quickly withdrew her hand and exclaimed, “That’s not something friends do! Don’t you know? Don’t you have any friends?”

“Oh. I didn’t know because I don’t have any.”

Ji-heon replied, pretending to hide his sinister thoughts with a nonchalant tone.

“I don’t mind, whatever it is.”

He was satisfied.

The title didn’t matter.

Friend or whatever. As long as he could occupy the space next to her.

Ji-heon had always lived that way.

Ch42 - I'm Sorry

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Pretending to be friends.

If that was all that was permitted, she could certainly pretend as much as needed.

Ji-heon was someone who felt no aversion to false relationships. He had always lived that way.

He couldn’t take the initiative to suffocate the relationship between a superior and a subordinate, so if she suggested it, he welcomed it.

For him, the title of “friend” was merely a means to an end.

Ji-heon looked at Jeong-oh with affectionate eyes.

Jeong-oh glared at him, hiding the back of her hand where he had just placed his lips.

Even that was a source of amusement for Ji-heon.

“But if I become friends with you, does that mean I’m old enough to feel younger? Do we really have that big of an age difference?”

“Of course. It’s not just one or two years; it’s three years.”

“You know my age, huh?”

As Ji-heon keenly pointed that out, Jeong-oh’s gaze, which had been meeting his, subtly shifted away before returning.

“Yes. The team leader told me.”

“Now that I think about it, your team leader seems quite interested in me.”

“Yes. Everyone on our team is very interested in you.”

“But if we’re friends, are you still going to call me ‘Director’?”

“What should I call you then?”

“You can just call me by my name.”

“…”

“You can even call me ‘Oppa’ if you want.”

Jeong-oh suppressed a laugh and bit her lip at his casually suggested words. It reminded her of the man who used to smile whenever she called him “Oppa” seven years ago.

Ah, don’t get lost in nostalgia, Lee Jeong-oh. Don’t forget your mission!

Instead of responding, Jeong-oh bowed her head. She couldn’t linger with him in her neighborhood for long.

“Well then, I’ll be going now. Thank you for the ride.”

She quickly bowed and turned to leave, not looking back.

Ji-heon didn’t follow her; he just watched quietly. After a moment, she turned a corner into an alley. Once she was out of sight, a hot sigh escaped Ji-heon’s lips.

It felt like she had taken her first step into something new. He had told Seung-kyu that it wasn’t romantic feelings, but somehow, he was starting to feel something akin to it. Although his desire, like hunger, still plagued him, he didn’t mind spending time getting to know her.

While a quiet smile lingered on his lips, his phone vibrated.

It was his friend Seung-kyu.

“Hello?”

[Hey, where are you?]

Seung-kyu’s voice sounded unusually quiet, hinting at some apprehension.

“I’m at work, just about to head home.”

[Oh, really? Want me to treat you to dinner?]

“Isn’t it the weekend? Aren’t you spending time with your family?”

[No, I wanted to talk to you about something.]

“What is it?”

[……You’re coming to my house on Monday, right?]

Ah.

Remembering the promise from earlier, Ji-heon chuckled.

Seung-kyu had come over a few days ago and made that request, but it seemed he was worried because Ji-heon hadn’t given a clear answer.

“I’ll come, so don’t worry.”

Ji-heon accepted cheerfully.

[Oh, really? Really?]

“Yeah.”

[Huh. What’s this? Thank you so much! I’ll do my best from now on! My friend, I really like you.]

Seung-kyu, overwhelmed with gratitude, even confessed his feelings dramatically.

Ji-heon thought Seung-kyu was a great dad. Of course, he was also a good friend.

Jeong-oh quickly ran home, her heart racing.

“That’s good. That’s good.”

Although she was a bit troubled by his kiss on her hand,

he had accepted her offer of friendship without any hesitation. He seemed to have no doubts at all.

As she grew closer to him, she was careful not to provoke Cha Eun-bi.

Approaching her house, Jeong-oh slowed her pace. Assured that Ji-heon wasn’t following her, she took a moment to catch her breath.

“Where have you been?”

“Ah!”

Someone suddenly spoke to her from behind. Startled by the voice, Jeong-oh almost stumbled backward, but Detective Kwon Ba-il nimbly caught her.

“Detective.”

“Hello.”

With Ba-il’s help, Jeong-oh straightened herself up. She felt a bit embarrassed for no reason.

“I was surprised because it’s not like I did anything bad.”

“Yes, I know. I startled you.”

“It’s fine. I was just coming back from work. Are you on your way somewhere?”

“Yes. I was playing soccer….”

“Oh, soccer.”

“There’s a soccer club at the precinct.”

“Detective, you’re chasing criminals every day. How do you manage to play soccer on the weekends?”

“Criminals can’t be kicked with my feet.”

Ah.

Thinking of the good-looking detective frowning fiercely as he caught criminals made Jeong-oh chuckle a little.

Seeing Jeong-oh smile, Ba-il also beamed a kind smile. However, beneath that smile, Jeong-oh caught sight of something that made her unable to smile further.

“Ah! Detective! A mosquito! A mosquito!”

There was a mosquito sitting on Ba-il’s exposed forearm!

Thwack!

Ba-il, who had been smiling blankly, belatedly slapped his arm, but the mosquito darted away quickly.

“Ah, I got bitten.”

Ba-il looked down at his forearm and said slowly.

Jeong-oh could see the skin swelling slightly on his forearm.

Even if he could catch criminals, it seemed he couldn’t catch mosquitoes.

She thought he had too naïve an impression to be a police officer, but he certainly had his clumsy moments.

It seemed like it would be itchy…

“Detective, wait a moment.”

Jeong-oh pulled out some clear tape from her bag. It was a habit she had developed from preparing for competitive presentations, so she always carried tape with her.

Jeong-oh cut a small piece of tape and stuck it on Ba-il’s forearm.

“This will help reduce the itch.”

“Oh. That’s a clever trick. Thank you.”

Ba-il nodded appreciatively, as if he found it to be an innovative tip.

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Sunday lunch. Eun-bi went out to meet Mrs. Jang as promised.

All the way there, Eun-bi felt anxious and restless. She was terrified that Ji-heon might have revealed everything to Mrs. Jang first.

Eun-bi sat at the table reserved for her in the upscale restaurant, waiting for Mrs. Jang with a pounding heart.

Mrs. Jang arrived ten minutes late.

“Mother!”

Eun-bi stood up with a bright smile, trying to hide her nervousness.

“Ah, Eun-bi. I’m late. The traffic was terrible.”

“It’s okay, Mother.”

Seeing Mrs. Jang’s face light up without any hint of discontent made Eun-bi breathe a sigh of relief.

“Do you like French cuisine, Eun-bi? I made a reservation on a whim, and I hope it suits your taste.”

“Mother, I can eat anything. I’ll enjoy anything you treat me to even more.”

“Good. That’s why you’re so lovely.”

Eun-bi felt delighted by Mrs. Jang’s compliment.

Soon, the courses began to arrive one by one. Eun-bi felt a lump in her throat as she received treatment she had never gotten from Ji-heon.

“Is work going well for you?”

Mrs. Jang asked during the meal. Eun-bi sighed lightly before answering.

“Work is fine, but there’s a problem with a person.”

“A problem with a person?”

“There’s a friend I’m having some trouble with.”

“Do you really have trouble with someone?”

Mrs. Jang smiled at Eun-bi, as if finding her adorable.

“Actually, a high school classmate of mine recently transferred in as a copywriter. But she really dislikes me.”

“Why not? Our lovely Eun-bi?”

“She’s a deputy, and I’m a manager, so maybe that’s why? I’m not sure.”

Eun-bi forced a smile, her expression growing weary as she continued.

“When we were in high school, her family was going through tough times. I tried to look after her because I felt sorry for her, but I wonder if those memories of inferiority complex stuck with her.”

“Oh dear. So that gratitude turned into an inferiority complex! Well, you are a manager, and she’s a deputy, so she must envy you.”

“And actually, she comes from a single-parent family. Even if she tries to hide it, it shows. There’s really no way to avoid it. I think the reason she doesn’t have a proper adult to guide her when problems arise is a big part of it.”

“Right. I’ve always told Ji-heon to be careful with single-parent families since he was young. Ah, Eun-bi, we really communicate well!”

Eun-bi felt proud as Mrs. Jang chimed in.

In truth, she had heard from her brother Eun-yeob that Mrs. Jang had a dislike for single-parent families.

Eun-bi burned with determination internally.

She would not break up with Jeong Ji-heon.

She could not allow Jeong-oh to take her place.

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The next day.

The meeting had dragged on, and before they knew it, evening had arrived.

Jeong-oh had removed all the papers she had stuck to the wall.

Cha Eun-bi, who hadn’t shown up all weekend, suddenly took a day off today. While it was a bit bitter that it felt like she was shirking her responsibilities, Jeong-oh couldn’t help but feel a bit relieved that the preparations for the competitive PT were progressing smoothly.

Today, they were supposed to finalize the production direction. Once that was set, they would begin working on the advertising proposals based on that direction.

“Let’s start the meeting at 7. Can someone go tell the director that we’re starting at 7?”

Who will put the bell on the cat?

Everyone bowed their heads at Mi-ran’s instruction.

“I’ll go.”

With no other option, Jeong-oh stepped up.

For Ji-heon, it had been a busy Monday. After attending an executive meeting at Max Planning, he had two external meetings, and by the time he finished processing a mountain of paperwork, it was already evening.

After tidying up his desk, Ji-heon stood up and put on his suit jacket. He had planned to meet Seung-kyu in the parking lot in ten minutes. It was the first time he was taking time off for “the kids” personally, not for work.

Just as he was about to leave his office, he heard a knock at the door, followed by it opening.

It was Jeong-oh, whom he hadn’t seen all day. His heart lightened at the sight of her despite the busy schedule.

She spoke in a very businesslike tone.

“Director, the meeting is ready. Is 7 o’clock okay for you?”

She had offered to be his friend just the other day.

Still, he didn’t forget his role as a director and asked her,

“What meeting?”

“You said we would decide on the production direction for the competitive PT today.”

Ah…

“Are you leaving work now?”

Ji-heon closed his eyes tightly and let out a quiet sigh. He had suddenly remembered the conversation he had with the production team last week.

When he reported to the planning team leader in the morning, he assumed the production meeting would have been postponed because the relevant research materials were expected to arrive tomorrow.

“Let’s push it to tomorrow morning.”

Jeong-oh’s expression turned awkward at his decision.

“I heard you didn’t have any appointments today, so I set it for today.”

“I had an unexpected matter come up. Let’s do it tomorrow morning. The planning side also said they weren’t ready with the research materials, so we can review everything together then.”

Jeong-oh’s gaze sharpened at Ji-heon’s response.

Ah, gotcha.

Recalling the time she had worked late for a study on Ye-na’s birthday, Jeong-oh felt she couldn’t miss this opportunity.

She raised her chin defiantly and pressed on.

“If the decision gets delayed, it might disrupt other schedules, Director.”

You think you can escape while you have work to do?

Let’s see how you handle this.

“What is it, Director?”

“Personal matters.”

“What kind of personal matters?”

“…….”

“Can you please finish this before you go? It’s something you really need to do, isn’t it?”

Jeong-oh pouted her lips and shot back with a sulky expression.

Ji-heon’s eyes narrowed as he sensed Jeong-oh’s intentions.

“Are you getting revenge?”

“No. I’m just asking you to consider it from another perspective.”

“I already apologized back then.”

“Honestly, that was just empty words.”

When Jeong-oh pointed it out, Ji-heon was left speechless.

He was someone who struggled to empathize with others’ feelings. Not only was the exit for emotions blocked, but it seemed like the entrance was too.

He had no choice but to admit this fact.

“I lack empathy. That’s on me.”

“…….”

“It’s also due to the accident seven years ago, but anyway, I’ve never really tried to understand anyone, so I guess it’s my fault.”

While Jeong-oh’s stubbornness, akin to a child throwing a tantrum to enter the meeting, was cute, he still couldn’t grant her request this time.

He wanted to keep that small promise made three weeks ago.

He didn’t want to make that little kid cry—the one who had said they should definitely meet again next Monday.

If that child hadn’t reminded him of her, he wouldn’t have been so concerned.

So, please understand.

Taking half a step closer, he spoke politely.

“I’m sorry. I really was sorry back then.”

Half a step.

“I’m sorry.”

Another half step.

“I’m sorry.”

“…….”

“I’m sorry.”

Jeong-oh shrank her shoulders, and her heart began to flutter.

“Sorry.”

With each step he took closer, his words of apology grew shorter.

The gentle tone he used was reminiscent of how one would speak to a friend, and it tickled her eyelashes right in front of her face at the very end.

She couldn’t help but look at him with trembling eyes.

Was he apologizing or tempting her? She couldn’t tell.

He tilted his head slightly and smiled.

“Is that enough?”

What the hell!

She felt dazed for a moment, but when she snapped back to reality and opened her eyes wide in surprise, he took a step back, certain he had received permission.

“See you tomorrow.”

The door opened, and he left first.

Jeong Ji-heon, you jerk!

She felt as if she had been toyed with by her superior’s flirtation.

The fact that she couldn’t tell anyone about this made Jeong-oh feel incredibly frustrated.

Ch43 - Angel's Kiss

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After sending Ji-heon off, Jeong-oh returned to the meeting room and said to Team Leader Mi-ran.

“I’m back. The meeting got canceled.”

“What did the Director say?”

“He said he has something to do today and suggested we meet tomorrow morning instead.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

Contrary to Jeong-oh’s expectations, Mi-ran looked relieved.

“The AE briefly shared the research results, and we missed some parts. So we’ll need to think a bit more. Let’s do our best by tomorrow morning.”

There were parts that needed improvement.

Phew. Jeong-oh let out a sigh.

If she had blocked Ji-heon from leaving the office, it could have become awkward for both sides.

Feeling relieved, she began to recall what had happened in the office just moments ago.

“Oh? Deputy, are you feeling unwell?”

Gi-hoon, passing by, noticed Jeong-oh’s complexion and said.

“Oh? No. Why?”

“Your face is red. You seem to have a fever.”

“No, it’s just a bit hot in the meeting room.”

Jeong-oh made a vague excuse.

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Ji-heon picked up Seung-kyu and set off for his friend’s house.

“Oh, I should be the one driving. I’m so honored that our Director, who usually has a chauffeur, is personally driving to our humble home.”

Seung-kyu was in a good mood because his friend kept their promise from three weeks ago and praised Ji-heon throughout the drive.

Despite Seung-kyu’s flattery, Ji-heon showed little reaction. The truth was, he was nervous. He had never taken the time to play with kids before. He didn’t even know how to talk to them.

If he could run away now, he would prefer to escape back to the office. The expression Jeong-oh had shown him before leaving the office still lingered in his mind.

“Can I just show my face to the kids and leave?”

“Why? Are you busy?”

“I’m just a bit anxious because I don’t know how to interact with kids.”

“Oh, come on. There’s no rule when it comes to kids.”

“Still, I can’t have fun playing with them like you do.”

“I’m not doing anything fun. I’m just watching from the side. You just smile at their eye level and move around a bit.”

“Move around?”

“I’m not telling you to dance and sing, but when you’re with kids, you end up moving a lot. It’ll be a good experience. You’ll be a dad someday too.”

As Ji-heon frowned slightly, Seung-kyu asked cautiously.

“Why?”

“Uh, I just have a bit of a headache.”

“…….”

“I’m fine now. It was just for a moment.”

Ji-heon answered as if it was no big deal.

The car smoothly made its way to the apartment complex. It was not far from where Jeong-oh lived. Ji-heon found himself thinking of Jeong-oh again as he walked with Seung-kyu.

“Daddy’s here!”

Seung-kyu shouted as he opened the front door, and the lively kids rushed toward him.

“Daddy!”

Seung-kyu lifted his daughter, Do-yoon, and patted his son, Do-bin. A few steps away, he spotted Ye-na. Dressed in a cute red outfit, she looked like a little Santa.

“Ye-na, you’re here too.”

“Hello.”

Ye-na greeted Seung-kyu.

Ji-heon also glanced at Ye-na. It seemed her pretty face had become even more beautiful since he last saw her.

Seung-kyu pulled Ji-heon’s arm and said to the kids.

“Hey, you all should say hello to your uncle too.”

“Hello, Uncle!”

Do-bin playfully shouted his greeting. Ye-na’s eyes sparkled as she greeted him.

“Hello.”

“Right. Hello.”

Ji-heon received Ye-na’s greeting with an awkward smile.

Jin-seo also came out of the kitchen to greet Ji-heon. Today, Jin-seo’s complexion seemed particularly pale.

“Nice to see you again, Ji-heon.”

“Yes, pardon me.”

“No, we should be the ones apologizing for asking you to come again when you must be busy. You haven’t had dinner yet, right? Just wait a moment.”

Jin-seo quickly showed her face and rushed back to the kitchen.

Jeong-oh felt a bit guilty thinking about how Jin-seo must be feeling the obligation to host someone while already overwhelmed by the kids.

Ye-na tugged at Ji-heon’s clothes, snapping him out of his thoughts. He looked down to see Ye-na gazing up at him with her bright, sparkling eyes.

“I waited for you.”

Ji-heon was taken aback by the child's words. Three weeks felt like quite a long time for kids, so what must she be thinking about that time? He had only spent a few minutes with her three weeks ago.

Did those few minutes truly hold such value for her?

In any case, he was grateful that she remembered him.

Ji-heon was pulled along by Ye-na, who led him to the living room table where a Go board was already set up. Ye-na sat in front of the black stones, blinking at him. It was a signal for him to sit down.

The reason she was waiting for him was clear.

She wanted to replay their Go match from long ago.

As Ji-heon sat down, the child opened the containers of black and white stones and placed one on the board at a time.

Ji-heon quietly watched what the child was doing. His eyes widened as he confirmed the moves laid out on the board.

It was a perfect replay of their match from three weeks ago. Every hair on his body stood on end as his head spun.

"You remembered all of that?"

Instead of answering, the child nodded. Her gaze was quite serious as she surveyed the board.

Ji-heon thought that the child might become a Go master one day.

"You can start here. You should start from here."

Ye-na, who had perfectly replayed their match from three weeks ago, told Ji-heon. It was now his turn.

As Ji-heon placed a stone on the board, the child smiled, seemingly anticipating his move, and placed her stone next to it.

After a few moves exchanged back and forth, Ji-heon became deeply focused.

Had the child been studying while replaying this match? He started to think that he might actually lose. The child had clearly developed immensely compared to three weeks ago.

“Ye-na, are you winning or losing?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

Ye-na answered firmly to Do-bin, who had been absentmindedly watching.

“Wow! What if Uncle loses?”

Do-bin asked seriously. Although it seemed like a simple question, it felt a bit mocking.

A strange competitive spirit ignited in Ji-heon. He hadn’t come this far just to lose in such a match.

Without holding back, Ji-heon made several aggressive moves.

As Ji-heon played offensively, Ye-na flinched. The last two moves seemed to have caught her by surprise. As Ye-na lowered her head deeply, staring intensely at the board, Ji-heon felt a ticklish excitement in his chest.

Just then.

Thud.

“Do-bin’s mom! Honey!”

A sound of something falling came from the kitchen, followed by Seung-kyu’s shout.

Ji-heon also stood up and headed toward the kitchen.

“Honey!”

Jin-seo was on the floor.

Her face appeared oddly pale, and she had lost consciousness while working in the kitchen.

“Mom!”

Do-bin also shouted in surprise. Ji-heon quickly grabbed Do-bin as he tried to run toward his mother.

Seung-kyu laid Jin-seo down and checked her pulse and pupils. Her lips were pale, but her breathing seemed okay.

“I’ll call an ambulance.”

While Seung-kyu assessed Jin-seo’s condition, Ji-heon called 119 for an ambulance. Seung-kyu’s face was turning as pale as Jin-seo’s.

Fortunately, the paramedics arrived quickly.

As Seung-kyu left with Jin-seo, he turned to Ji-heon and said, “Ji-heon, I’m really sorry. Can you watch the kids for a bit?”

“Don’t worry, just go quickly.”

Ji-heon watched him leave, hoping it wasn’t anything serious.

As soon as Seung-kyu and Jin-seo were gone, little Do-yoon burst into tears.

“Mommy! Mommy….”

At this age, being separated from Mommy and Daddy was still very difficult. Hearing Do-yoon’s pitiful call for his mother, Ji-heon picked him up.

“Mommy….”

He continued to pat the child gently, but the crying wouldn’t stop. It was a shocking situation for Ji-heon as well, but he knew that if he didn’t appear calm, the kids would only be more frightened.

By the time Do-yoon stopped crying, Do-bin began to whimper.

“What’s going to happen to our mom? Is she going to die?”

“No, no. She’ll be okay.”

“Then why is this happening?”

“She’ll go to the hospital and get better really quickly.”

“What if she doesn’t come back?”

“She will. Don’t worry.”

“Uuhhhh….”

The child who had looked so mature while expressing affection for Ye-na had crumbled at the sight of his mother fainting. Fortunately, by the time Ji-heon set down Do-yoon, who had cried himself to sleep, he was able to pick up Do-bin.

“What if our mom dies?”

“She won’t die. Don’t worry.”

“How do you know that, uncle?”

“Uncle knows everything.”

Ji-heon managed to comfort Do-bin until he stopped crying.

“Now, now. You can’t cry in front of your girlfriend. That won’t do, right?”

Do-bin nodded while sniffling back the tears that had run out of his nose. Once he set Do-bin down, his shoulders felt stiff.

As Ji-heon stretched his shoulders to loosen up, another challenge presented itself.

Ye-na was looking at him with her fairy-like face, her eyes blinking expectantly.

“What about me? What about me?”

“Won’t you hold me?”

“What about me? What about me? What about me?”

It felt like a question mark aura was surrounding the child.

“Um….”

Cold sweat began to trickle down Ji-heon’s back.

He bent down to meet the child at eye level and gently said, “I’m sorry, but I can’t hold you.”

Ye-na’s big eyes started to fill with tears.

Her lips began to pout forward.

No, I can’t let this child cry.

Ji-heon’s voice trembled in panic.

“Okay, okay. I’ll hold you, but let’s make one promise.”

At the mention of being held, Ye-na’s pouting lips quickly retracted.

“Don’t go tell your mom that the uncle is a bad person, okay? Got it?”

Ye-na nodded vigorously.

The handsome uncle carefully extended his arms. As her bottom rested in his sturdy arms, Ye-na was lifted up into the air. Instinctively, she hugged

Ji-heon’s neck to maintain her balance.

“Wow….”

Ji-heon’s heart raced like popcorn sizzling in a frying pan.

He had never been held and lifted this high before.

It was a different height from being with his mother, and it felt like a firmer warmth.

A safe, comforting feeling that seemed like it could shield him from all the scary things in the world.

Since the uncle was holding him, he shouldn’t cry anymore. He was so happy that it felt like he might tear up.

It was a hug given not to soothe a crying child, but simply to hold him.

When Ji-heon lifted the child, and Ye-na wrapped her arms around his neck, he felt a strange flutter in his chest.

The child was relying on him without any prior connection. The unfamiliarity of it was odd.

He had never thought about marriage before, but if a child like this called him “Dad,” he felt that getting married might not be such a bad idea.

But, after all, he couldn’t move too freely with someone else’s child. Moreover, it felt like the child’s body was a bit warm. Growing worried, Ji-heon’s hand naturally moved to touch Ye-na’s forehead.

“Do you feel unwell?”

“No.”

“You feel a bit warm, though.”

“I’m not sick at all.”

It seemed that Ye-na, worried that Ji-heon might set her down, clung tightly to his clothing.

As Ji-heon lifted her bangs to check her forehead, he noticed a red spot in the center of her forehead. Since her face was fair, the spot stood out even more.

A salmon patch.

“You have one too.”

“Do you have one, Uncle?”

Ye-na reached out her hand toward Ji-heon’s forehead and asked.

“It’s gone now, but I used to have one.”

The salmon patch, also known as an angel’s kiss.

It truly seemed like a mark left by an angel kissing the child, and Ji-heon couldn’t help but keep looking at Ye-na.

Ch44 - Pretty Girl

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Guk-soon hurried to Dobin’s house after receiving the call.

When she rang the doorbell, a stranger came out and greeted her politely.

“Hello.”

“You’re not the baby’s father, are you?”

“No, he went to the hospital with her.”

“Oh, right, right.”

Guk-soon clapped her hands and nodded her head.

Inside the house, Ye-na ran over and hugged Guk-soon.

“Grandma!”

Ye-na also introduced Guk-soon to Ji-heon.

“Uncle, this is my grandma.”

“Hello. I’m Jeong Ji-heon, a friend of Dobin’s father. I came to visit and ended up taking care of the kids. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. How’s Dobin’s mom? I heard she collapsed. Is she okay?”

“Yes, she seems to be feeling better now.”

“Oh, thank goodness. But your friend must really like kids to come over like this.”

That’s not really it…

Ji-heon glanced at Ye-na to gauge her reaction and then fell silent.

It seemed Guk-soon didn’t know that Ye-na and he had made plans to meet today. There was no need to bring up things that the child hadn’t mentioned, but he thought the child was quite clever.

Well, that’s how kids are. I was like that too.

Guk-soon looked at Ji-heon with a motherly smile.

Oh, he’s really handsome.

I wish I could have a son-in-law like him.

Now that she was happily living without a son-in-law, she didn’t have any regrets, but she couldn’t help but admire handsome men.

“Thank you so much for today. Please tell Dobin’s mom I appreciate it, and I hope she recovers soon.”

“Yes, I will.”

“Goodbye, Uncle.”

“Okay, goodbye…”

“Ye-na, goodbye! Come back to play!”

As Ji-heon was trying to say goodbye to Ye-na, Dobin ran over and shouted. Ji-heon’s farewell was drowned out.

“Well, then, goodbye.”

Ji-heon greeted Guk-soon separately.

On the way home, Ye-na excitedly recounted everything that had happened that day to Guk-soon. She was surprised when the uncle hugged her after Dobin's mom collapsed, but she felt good because he had held her.

"The uncle is really tall, so I went really high!"

"You had fun playing with the uncle, my little puppy."

"Yes! And I won at Go! But I know that the uncle let me win."

As she talked, Ye-na displayed various emotions, getting excited and then pouting. Guk-soon smiled warmly at her cuteness.

There was a hint of sadness in her thoughts. She wished her granddaughter could have had a dad.

"Hey? Uncle!"

As they were almost home, Ye-na suddenly glanced at a nearby building and shouted. Guk-soon turned her head in the direction Ye-na was looking.

A tall, handsome man in a police uniform stood near the entrance of the adjacent building. Under the streetlight, his fair face looked even paler.

Another uncle.

The man recognized Ye-na and came closer.

"Ye-na, who…"

"It's the police uncle! He helped me when I got lost and took me to my Go academy."

While Guk-soon was still bewildered, Ye-na confidently introduced the police officer.

"Hello, my name is Kwon Bae-il, and I work at the Hwayang Police Station."

Bae-il also bowed politely in greeting. Only then did Guk-soon smile warmly.

“Oh, I see. Police officer!”

“You must be Ye-na’s grandmother. I heard about you from Ye-na’s mother.”

“Our daughter knows you?”

“Yes, I’ve seen her a few times nearby. This is my home.”

“Oh, really? It’s so reassuring to have a police officer living nearby! It’s really nice to meet you.”

Oh, he’s so handsome.

Guk-soon’s expression brightened at having met two handsome men in one day.

Bae-il secretly chuckled at Guk-soon’s reaction, which was similar to Jeong Ji-heon’s.

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Eun-bi felt the pressure of having to go back to work tomorrow. She had taken a sick day but couldn’t extend it any longer.

Eun-bi despised Lee Jeong-o.

‘If only I could separate him from my oppa.’

She couldn’t just sit back and do nothing. Eun-bi decided to dig into Jeong-o’s weaknesses.

‘Maybe I can find something out by asking his former colleagues.’

There’s no one without skeletons in their closet, so there must be something. Since it was an advertising company, he might have caused

some trouble, or there could be money issues or problems with men.

However, Eun-bi didn't know anyone from Jeong-o's previous company. As she pondered, she recalled a time when she received a business card from a headhunter.

[Yes, this is Lee Dong-eun.] "Hello, are you the headhunter? I'm Cha Eun-bi, a copywriter at Max Planning. Do you remember me?"

[Ah, yes! Hello!]
The headhunter greeted warmly.

Eun-bi, who couldn't afford to waste any time, got straight to the point.

"I'm interested in Two H Communications. Is there any way I could meet someone from that company?"

After throwing in a few more comments as if she were interested in changing jobs, the headhunter immediately opened up with the information.

[There's an AE I've been close to for a long time working there. Shall we meet together?]
"Yes! As soon as possible!"

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Jeong-o summarized the results of today's meeting.

Due to a change in the direction of the competing PT plan, they would have to put in extra overtime. In any case, the revisions were being made step by step. Jeong-o and Mi-ran decided to finish up, and the others scattered.

"Team leader, you couldn't rest either, right? I'll finish everything and send it by email, so you can go home first."

"No, I should report to you first."

"You have to work all night again tomorrow, right? Just go home."

Seeing how exhausted Mi-ran looked, Jeong-o sent her home first and took on the final tasks himself. Although he was weary from working through the weekend and now into the night, it was manageable. It seemed easier to express his opinions without Cha Eun-bi around.

“Ugh, I’m done!”

Around midnight, Jeong-o stretched while yawning lazily.

“Good job.”

“Ahhh, mom!”

He nearly fell backward from the voice that suddenly came from nearby while he was still sitting in his chair.

Ji-heon caught his wobbling chair.

This time, he had truly just steadied her, but Jeong-o’s heart didn’t calm down. As Ji-heon reached out, Jeong-o waved his hands frantically, thinking he might be trying to push him again.

“Why are you here, Director?”

Jeong-o, now steady on his feet, asked. His heart continued to flutter uneasily.

“I came to see if you were still working.”

“At this hour? But I thought you had something to do today.”

“I came back after finishing. Because of someone.”

“Who?”

The way Ji-heon smiled felt strangely significant.

He recalled the events from the office earlier in the day. Ji-heon had repeatedly apologized in a way that felt seductive. His gentle approach

reminded Jeong-o of seven years ago, and he found himself getting oddly hopeful about such actions again.

Nostalgia.

“I just remembered a pretty girl.”

He thought of another pretty girl.

“What?”

Jeong-o tilted his head as if he hadn’t heard correctly. There was no chance to repeat himself. At that moment, the head of the planning team, who had been focused on revising the project, spotted Ji-heon and hurried over.

“Director, I thought you had something to do today. Are you still here?”

“I came after finishing my work. Is there something you need to discuss?”

“There’s an issue I’d like you to look at right now.”

Ji-heon looked back and forth between Jeong-o and the team leader before leaving with the team leader. Jeong-o felt a strange sensation, as if a lingering regret was sticking to his footsteps.

He had a feeling that the look in his eyes today, as if a spoonful of sugar had been added, would torment his heart for a long time.

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After leaving work at midnight, Jeong-o heard the news that Jin-seo had collapsed in the morning.

“It was fortunate that a friend of the baby’s dad was over. Otherwise, it could have been a big problem. It would have been tough to take the kids to the hospital.”

Guk-soon clicked her tongue, expressing her concern for Jin-seo as she recounted the events of yesterday.

“I should contact Dobin’s family later to check on how she’s doing.”

Jeong-o also felt worried about Jin-seo.

“By the way, Yena really likes Dobin’s dad’s friend. She kept calling him ‘Uncle’ and talking a lot.”

“Yena likes him?”

“Of course! He’s really good-looking. Looking at that, it seems like my granddaughter takes after me.”

“Geez. Seriously, Mom, such a materialist.”

“You talk as if you don’t care about a guy’s looks?”

“I don’t care about looks. Not at all.”

“Don’t lie, you! Your daughter is that pretty!”

“Mom, I made my daughter’s beauty.”

In the morning’s playful banter, Yena groggily woke up. As soon as she got up, she called for Jeong-o, whining.

“Mom, why did you come home so late yesterday?”

“Aww, our baby, are you awake?”

Jeong-o stopped the conversation with Guk-soon and rushed to Yena.

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After diligently preparing, Jeong-o arrived at work early and immediately began preparing for a meeting.

Jeong-o organized the updated information in the conference room with Ko Eun-joo, a fellow associate, and the AE from the planning team. If the

materials prepared by the planning team conflicted with the production drafts, they would have to revise them again.

Eun-bi finally returned to work. She hadn't shown her face from Saturday to Monday, and Jeong-o suspected that she must have been hurt by Ji-heon, and indeed, it looked like she had lost some weight in that time.

As Eun-bi entered the meeting room, the AE from the planning team asked worriedly.

"Manager Cha, are you okay? I heard you were sick."

"No, I'm fine. I'm just worried about the PT. Ugh, this sense of responsibility."

Ko Eun-joo, who found that irritating, flared her nostrils. Jeong-o quietly laughed at Eun-joo's reaction.

Noticing this, Eun-bi shot Jeong-o a glance before carefully addressing the AE again.

"By the way, may I offer my opinion?"

"Of course, of course."

Jeong-o sighed first, wondering why she would want to interfere with an already completed proposal.

"For starters, I think the main copy 'I miss you' is too cliché. What does the planning team think?"

Eun-bi's opinion was once again a rebuttal to the copy.

However, to bring up complaints about the material to the planning team AE, on the day the production direction was being finalized, wasn't the right approach.

Was she trying to use the influence of the planning team to interfere with the copy? That's not how it should be, Cha Eun-bi.

And wasn’t that copy written by me? It was proposed by Ko Eun-joo. You’ve got it wrong.

Jeong-o felt bitter, but since Ko Eun-joo didn’t say anything, he kept quiet. In any case, Eun-bi’s opinion was unlikely to be accepted.

“I thought this copy lacks learning and depth. If I had been in better condition, I could have come up with a better idea, and I apologize for that. Also, I was a bit disappointed that the main characters were a mother and daughter. Since the primary target is 20-30 year-olds, wouldn’t a couple in a long-distance relationship be better than a mother and daughter?”

This time, Jeong-o immediately countered.

“Of course, we considered long-distance couples. But I felt that 15 seconds was too short to explain the background for long-distance couples. Having a mother and daughter makes it more relatable for consumers. I believe that, in a short time, a mother’s love is much more effective than the concept of a long-distance relationship.”

Eun-bi replied sharply, “I don’t find this advertisement appealing even when I imagine it.”

“Lack of imagination, perhaps…”

Unable to hold back, Eun-joo muttered under her breath. She was irritated because Cha Eun-bi, who hadn’t even been present for the discussions, was trying to overturn the results of their hard work.

Although it was meant to be a whisper, the surrounding silence allowed Eun-bi to hear Eun-joo’s voice. Cha Eun-bi wouldn’t just let it go.

“Manager Ko, since you’re here as a substitute for Assistant Manager Jo, shouldn’t you be handling the tasks she was responsible for? Have you organized this week’s trending issues?”

Eun-joo crossed her arms instead of answering.

“Manager, are you planning to join today’s meeting?”

“Yes, of course. Why do you ask?”

“Just worried that you might feel uncomfortable.”

Seeing Eun-bi tilt her head in confusion at her words, Eun-joo, with a face that showed not a hint of concern, continued, “I heard that you broke up with Director Jeong Ji-heon. I got that news when I received the handover from Assistant Manager Jo.”

Unflinchingly, Eun-joo revealed the information she had.

What Cha Eun-bi didn’t yet know was that the esteemed princess would turn to fire if her pride was wounded.

“It must be really painful for you, not being able to have the wedding you longed for.”

The AE from the planning team gaped in shock at the new information.

Cha Eun-bi’s face turned a deep, almost purplish red.

Jeong-o wondered who Assistant Manager Jo might have heard that from.

‘Could it be Jeong Ji-heon?’

Last Friday, hadn’t he seen Assistant Manager Jo walking toward Ji-heon’s office?

It was the day after he had pressed Ji-heon about the wedding.

‘Ugh.’

A chill ran down his spine.

Although he had given Eun-bi a week’s grace period, it seemed that he had never intended to wait quietly from the start.

‘What a slightly scary person.’

While he felt sorry for Eun-bi’s situation, it was something he couldn’t involve himself in.

Right? Cha Eun-bi.

Why did you have to target Ko Eun-joo instead of me?

Ch45 - My Man

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“Did Assistant Manager Jo say that? That I broke up with the director? So now you’re believing someone who’s caused a scene and got kicked out of the team?”
Eun-bi, her face reddened with anger, was the first to leave the meeting room.

She was clearly going to confront Assistant Manager Jo.

Though Eun-joo had clearly won this round, her expression remained largely unchanged even after leaving the meeting room.

“Dare to touch me?”

Eun-joo muttered quietly to herself, and Jeong-o just silently observed.

“Is my head resting on your shoulder because you’re feeling lonely?”

Ugh. That’s really absurd and horrifying…

Jeong-o cautiously imagined resting his head on her shoulder and instinctively grabbed his own head.

Thinking he shouldn’t show any emotions, he tried to let out a laugh but instead inhaled sharply. At that moment, his eyes met Eun-joo’s, who was staring at him intently, almost accusingly.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“……”

“Assistant Manager Ko, you don’t curse, right? You think people who do are all low-class.”

“Sometimes it’s necessary to show a bit of humanity, you know?”

Eun-joo replied without blinking.

“How about you curse just this once? You’re good at belittling people with a smile. Quite the innocent nonsense, I’d say.”

Pfft.

“Assistant Manager Lee, don’t laugh. If you don’t curse during times like this, you’ll end up with bruises inside.”

Instead of having bruises inside, Jeong-o felt even more cheerful thanks to Assistant Manager Ko.

Soon, news of the breakup would spread. Given the things they’d said in the past, Cha Eun-bi would likely receive even more disapproving looks.

Eun-bi headed straight for Assistant Manager Jo. Though she had left the meeting room in anger, she began to reconsider as she climbed the stairs, thinking about what the wisest course of action was.

Eun-bi opened the door to the reading room with moist, sorrowful eyes. She spotted Assistant Manager Jo sitting blankly at her desk, aimlessly fiddling with her phone.

“Assistant Manager Jo.”

“Oh, yes. Manager, what brings you here?”

Assistant Manager Jo looked at her with a wary gaze.

Last Friday, she had been called in by Ji-heon. It was then she learned that all the wedding stories Eun-bi had told her were nothing but lies.

Although Ji-heon hadn’t stated it outright, Assistant Manager Jo could sense it. No, she got the impression that Ji-heon had deliberately made indirect remarks hoping that Eun-bi’s lies would be exposed.

Since leaving Ji-heon’s office, she had felt a burning desire to spill the truth to someone, but no one would engage with her.

The only person who sought her out when she was alone was Assistant Manager Ko. Eun-joo had come to her to discuss the handover, and Jo had seized the chance to share all sorts of things, embellishing the stories she’d heard.

She knew that someday, Eun-bi would come running to her. However, Jo was undeterred. If Cha Eun-bi wasn’t Ji-heon’s fiancée, then she was useless to Jo.

So, even though she regarded Eun-bi with indifference, she was taken aback when Eun-bi asked her, tears welling in her eyes, “How have you been? I really miss you. Assistant Manager Jo was my best friend. It feels like an arm has been cut off.”

Assistant Manager Jo’s gaze wavered.

Sensing the shift, Eun-bi carefully asked, “…Did you hear anything from Ji-heon?”

“……”

“That’s not true. There are just some complicated issues arising right now.”

Eun-bi looked at Si-nae with serious eyes, having a good grasp of how to move her heart.

“There’s a main culprit behind this. Remember when we talked in our bathroom? Don’t you recall?”

“……”

“My and Assistant Manager Jo’s instincts were spot on. Do you understand how I feel?”

“……So you’re saying that Jeong Oh stole Director Jung from you?”

As expected, Si-nae reacted quickly.

“……I’ll tell you everything eventually. But it’s not true that Assistant Manager Jo knows anything. I feel really unfair and frustrated, but I’ll get through it.”

“……”

“Assistant Manager Jo being here is all because of Jeong Oh. Let’s overcome this together. Let’s gather our strength and restore everything to how it was.”

Letting her know that she was a victim like her.

The two of them shared a perfect sense of solidarity in their plight.

Eun-bi had to remain unbreakable.

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10:05 AM.

After finishing the meeting preparations, Jeong Oh went to call Ji-heon.

Ji-heon was already in the hallway. Spotting Jeong Oh, he smirked slightly. Jeong Oh approached him without showing any signs of emotion and asked, “You’re going to the meeting, right, Director?”

“Of course.”

As they stood side by side and took a few steps together, Jeong Oh’s curiosity was piqued. He asked with a suspicious glance, “Did you perhaps say something to Assistant Manager Jo? That Eun-bi is lying?”

Ji-heon didn’t answer. But Jeong Oh read a silent affirmation in his silence.

Wow……

Impressive, really impressive.

While Ji-heon schemed for the truth, and Cha Eun-bi for the lies, somehow both had a tendency to manipulate people to their advantage.

Seven years ago, I didn’t know this man’s true nature.

For some reason, it irritated him. He trailed alongside Ji-heon and shot back, “But can you really be so relaxed about this? I think you’re making a huge mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“Isn’t the whole fake relationship a mistake?”

“Is that jealousy I detect?”

“No! I’m advising you as a friend!”

Ugh, he’s impossible. Jeong Oh left Ji-heon behind and headed into the meeting room first.

Soon, the first planning and production meeting began. The planning proposal was presented by the head of the planning team, and the production proposal was presented by Seong Mi-ran.

The response was positive. Everyone in the planning team was satisfied with the production proposal. Ji-heon, too, added only a few points for improvement without significant criticism.

“The advantage of an in-house agency is that we can receive cooperation from other affiliates. I’d like to see a few ideas that utilize affiliate benefits. Since we’re short on time, if you can prepare it by tomorrow, I’ll review it and make a cooperation request to the affiliates.”

I thought he wasn’t interested in work, but he still puts in some effort.

Jeong Oh chuckled from the corner.

At that moment, his eyes met Ji-heon’s from a distance.

“By the way, who is scheduled to give the production presentation?”

“I’m planning to do it for now, but I’m considering that the target audience is 2030.”

Seong Mi-ran replied.

“How about having Cha Eun-bi do it? She has a pleasant expression.”

The head of the planning team recommended Eun-bi, who smiled brightly in response.

Ji-heon didn’t even glance at Eun-bi and asked Mi-ran instead, “Jeong Oh prepared the PT diligently, right?”

“Yes. Jeong Oh always works hard.”

As Mi-ran praised Jeong Oh, Ji-heon sneaked a glance at him and smiled faintly.

“He’s quite quick-witted as well.”

Jeong Oh found Ji-heon’s compliment oddly unflattering; it felt like mockery.

The quick wit she had displayed in front of Ji-heon had only served to criticize him.

Still, hearing him praise her in front of everyone made her heart race a little.

“Let’s go with Jeong Oh for the presentation.”

Moments later, Ji-heon made his decision.

Jeong Oh was slightly surprised but nodded calmly.

Everyone was satisfied with Ji-heon’s choice, but Eun-bi, who was shocked, bit her lower lip tightly.

After the meeting, all the competitors for the PT had lunch together. Jeong Oh continued talking with the AE of the planning team and Seong Mi-ran.

Since Jeong Oh had never met the people from Sound Telecom, she didn’t really know the atmosphere. She needed to familiarize herself with the tendencies of the executives and the points to watch out for in the PT venue.

She listened intently, so much so that she was unsure whether the abalone rice dish Ji-heon had treated her to was even going into her ears or her nose.

“By the way, you seem to be eating less today, Assistant Manager. Are you nervous?”

“Haha. No, I’m just really focused on what the team leader is saying.”

“Pfft. That’s why I can trust you. You never lose your composure, no matter where you are.”

Seong Mi-ran praised her again. However, Mi-ran was busy and couldn’t stay by her side the whole time.

“Well, I’ll excuse myself then. Enjoy your meal slowly.”

Mi-ran got up first, and other team members began to leave one by one. Finally, Gi-hun waited for Jeong Oh, but he too got called back by the client and rushed out of the restaurant.

Just as Jeong Oh was about to step out of the restaurant, someone sidled up next to her.

It was Cha Eun-bi.

“Do you know why Ji-heon oppa is showing interest in you?”

“……”

“It’s because of you, Jeong Oh. It’s you.”

Jeong Oh felt as if the hearty lunch she had just enjoyed was weighing heavily in her stomach.

But she quickly resigned herself.

Yeah, Cha Eun-bi. If you want to vent your frustrations on someone because you’ve been pushed into a corner, I’m more than willing to entertain you.

What would it be like for you to wait for me in front of the restaurant just to say that one sentence?

Jeong Oh stood still, listening to Eun-bi’s words.

“Oppa was born into a chaebol family, so he has this innate sense of empathy. He can’t just ignore shabby kids, and if he hears that someone is starving, he’ll unhesitatingly give them money.”

“……”

“If I were you, coming from a single-parent household with nothing to my name and evoking sympathy, oppa would definitely show interest in that shell of yours.”

As Jeong Oh remained silent and just stared, Eun-bi grew more animated and pressed on.

“Did you perhaps try to look even more pitiful? Because that’s your only competitive edge?”

“……”

“Still, no matter how uneducated you are, there are lines you shouldn’t cross. How can you go after a friend’s boyfriend?”

“Friend’s boyfriend?”

Jeong Oh raised an eyebrow and asked briefly.

Eun-bi corrected her statement.

“Oh. It’s a bit much to call us friends. Anyway, it’s not good to meddle in someone else’s relationship, Jeong Oh.”

Jeong Oh lifted one corner of her mouth and quietly smiled.

“Thanks for the advice. Hearing you say that makes sense. I guess it’s because I’m Jeong Oh. But what can I do?”

Now it was time for a counterattack.

Jeong Oh wasn’t just someone who would sit back and take it.

This situation, where no one else was around, isn’t just favorable for you. I can speak freely too, Cha Eun-bi.

“You must be suffering since you’ve never even received that kind of attention. You can never be Jeong Oh.”

Jeong Oh’s blow made Eun-bi’s eyes widen.

“And what about someone else’s boyfriend? Someone else’s property?”

“…….”

“How can you say that person is yours? He’s never been yours even once.”

With Jeong Oh’s confident question, Eun-bi’s eyes were filled with tears of rage.

Jeong Oh realized one thing.

‘They really have nothing between them!’

Once she realized that, Eun-bi's actions became even more incomprehensible.

"You're the one clinging to someone hopeless, Eun-bi. You will never have Jeong Ji-heon."

"……."

"He's my man."

Well, that's what I meant when I said he's the father of my child.

I'm sorry, Ji-heon.

I don't want to talk about you like you're an object. But the things she's saying are downright rude. So please excuse me for a moment.

Jeong Oh inwardly apologized to Ji-heon while smiling sweetly at Eun-bi.

She wondered if she had gone too far. But then she recalled the memory of what had happened last Wednesday in Ji-heon's office, and this seemed trivial in comparison.

Eun-bi's face twitched in response to Jeong Oh's words. It seemed she couldn't grab her hair first because of her pride, leaving her frustrated and unsure of what to do.

Clenching her fists tightly enough that her nails might break, Eun-bi stared at Jeong Oh and strode toward the company.

Not at all sorry.

Jeong Oh watched her for a while and muttered quietly.

"Pfft. What a tiny thing."

"Pfft. Right?"

Huh…?

Startled by a voice coming from behind, Jeong Oh quickly turned around.

It felt like all the blood drained from her body.

No, why are you here…?

From behind a pillar in the piloti parking lot, a person emerged—someone she hadn’t even realized was there.

She didn’t know there was space behind the pillar.

Jeong Oh almost stumbled backward, feeling like she had tripped over nothing.

Does he think he’s got something on her now? Ji-heon was looking at her with a satisfied expression, as if he was struggling to suppress his laughter.

Jeong Oh thought to herself.

I’ll probably kick myself under the covers for the next 20 years thinking about today.

No, it wasn’t just 20 years that would be the issue.

What… what exactly did I say?

“He’s my man.”

That insane statement she had thrown at Eun-bi echoed back in Jeong Oh’s head.

Ch46 - Your Man

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Just five minutes ago, all the conversations flashed through Jeong Oh’s mind like a panorama of her life.

I didn’t even realize he was standing behind the pillar…

She never expected that her reckless, fatal behavior would lead to such intense regret.

Moreover…

He’s my man, he’s my man, he’s my man…

Oh my god!

Having scorned Cha Eun-bi’s fabrications so harshly, she had just uttered the same nonsensical claim.

Jeong Oh, you fool. Has this man ever been yours?

Even when you fell in love seven years ago, he was never yours.

How ridiculous is that statement…

“He sure knows how to talk.”

Ji-heon, standing close by, mocked her with a chilling voice. Jeong Oh felt as if she might vomit up the abalone dolsot rice she had just eaten, covering her mouth.

God, why are you putting me through this trial?

In the midst of her desperation, Jeong Oh heard the voice of God within her.

‘Run away!’

God had given Jeong Oh strong legs to use in situations like this. She abandoned Ji-heon and dashed toward the side of the company, her eyes brimming with tears.

She should be getting closer to him, especially now that they had barely become friends.

Why did such an unfortunate incident happen? How could she have claimed to be with him?

Rushing to the office, Jeong Oh grabbed Mi-ran’s arm and pleaded desperately.

“Team Leader, is there any work I can do outside?”

“Um, let’s see? Why? Do you want to go outside?”

“Yes! Please let me go!”

“Alright, alright. The AE is going to the meeting with Sori Telecom; why don’t you tag along?”

“Yes! Thank you so much!”

Jeong Oh hurriedly packed her bag and left the office. Avoiding Ji-heon, she took the stairs down and hid in the restroom of the first-floor lobby, only coming out when she was called by the AE.

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Jeong Oh had fled. Like a squirrel.

Ji-heon hurried after her, but his phone rang, causing him to stop in his tracks.

After finishing the call, he rushed back to the office to look for Jeong Oh, but she had already made her escape.

He wanted to demand she return immediately, but he held back. She was likely to benefit from being outside for the time being, so he couldn't hastily pull the brakes. After all, she would come back eventually.

As her superior, it was a matter of fate that they would meet again, so Ji-heon decided to enjoy the brief wait.

As lunch hour approached, someone knocked on the office door. The person who walked in was none other than Cha Eun-yeob.

"Are you busy? I stopped by briefly while I was at the company in the next building."

"Yeah, good to see you. Have a seat."

Ji-heon greeted his friend warmly.

Cha Eun-yeob, Eun-bi's older brother. Seven years ago, when Ji-heon had his accident, Eun-yeob, like Eun-bi, had helped in his recovery. Because of that, Ji-heon still treated Eun-yeob with respect.

Eun-yeob used the term "close friend" without reservation when addressing Ji-heon, but Ji-heon didn't feel as comfortable with him as he did with Seung-kyu.

Still, he was a moderately good friend who showed concern for his health.

However, Ji-heon couldn't tell if their friendship would continue in the future.

Given the situation with Eun-bi, he inadvertently caused Eun-yeob some worry, so he felt he should wear a serious expression, but he kept finding himself smiling as he thought of Jeong Oh.

“Why do you keep smiling?”

Seeing Ji-heon struggle to hold back laughter, Eun-yeob asked, “What’s so funny?”

“Just something amusing happened.”

“What kind of thing?”

“It’s just a personal matter.”

Eun-yeob forced a smile, feeling somewhat displeased. Despite being long-time friends and having a lot intertwined, Ji-heon still seemed reluctant to let him into that side of his life.

He felt a sense of unease, as if something he had long desired was starting to unravel.

In the midst of this, Ji-heon casually asked, his voice light as if discussing the weather, “By the way, did you hear that Eun-bi talked about it?”

“What about?”

“That she decided to end the fake dating.”

“…….”

“Did you know she was going around saying she was going to marry me?”

A twitch appeared beneath Eun-yeob’s eyes.

Ji-heon wore a subtle smile, but his gaze was chillingly sharp. It was the look of someone probing for the truth.

“How about just marrying her?”

Eun-yeob tried to hide his nervousness as he suggested this to Ji-heon. “After all, you don’t really have a girlfriend, do you? I mean, Eun-bi is really kind and understanding…”

“Eun-bi deserves to meet the right person,” Ji-heon cut him off. He acted as if he was considering Eun-bi’s feelings, but his attitude was one of complete rejection.

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After a very productive day out, Jeong Oh returned to the company and, as soon as she set her bag down, received some shocking news from Gi-hoon.

“Assistant Jeong, Director Jeong wants to see you.”

“Are you kidding me?”

Jeong Oh couldn’t help but shout. The team members, unaware of her serious situation, burst into laughter.

I’ll quit.

I’ll find another job.

I’ll end everything.

Jeong Oh quickly found a resignation letter template online and printed it out.

As she scribbled something on the printed paper, Deputy Manager Park Young-kwang asked, “What are you doing?”

“I thought it would be reassuring to have my resignation letter close to my heart.”

Assistant Ko Eun-joo leaned in to ask, “What did you mess up this time, Assistant?”

After folding the resignation letter twice and slipping it into her pocket, Jeong Oh looked at Eun-joo and grinned.

“Eun-joo, you know I really like you, right?”

“Let’s go.”

Perhaps due to the earnestness in Jeong Oh’s eyes, Eun-joo unexpectedly agreed to accompany her.

Gi-hoon also pushed his chair back and approached.

“Should I come along too?”

“Oh, that would be great.”

“But if we all go without a reason, won’t the director think we’re being rude? I don’t think he’ll like that.”

“It’s fine. I don’t like him either. Plus, I have something to report. It’ll be okay.”

Eun-joo cynically responded to Gi-hoon’s question.

The trio once again made their way to Ji-heon’s office.

With Eun-joo on the left and Gi-hoon on the right, Jeong Oh boldly stood before Ji-heon.

Even in the face of Ji-heon’s bewildered expression, Jeong Oh confronted him bravely.

“Director, you called for me.”

“I didn’t call for the two next to you.”

“Right. But Assistant Ko also had something to report, so we came together. And Mr. Song is here to listen as well.”

In response to Jeong Oh’s brazen reply, Ji-heon’s expression turned cold as he asked Eun-joo, “What is it you want to report?”

“Here is the draft for the new product package from Daewon Liquor.”

Assistant Ko Eun-joo replied, handing over the document she had been holding behind her. Ji-heon skimmed through it and said dryly, “This will work. Is that all?”

“Yes.”

Oh no, Assistant Ko…

Jeong Oh felt a chill at Eun-joo’s nonchalant response.

The air was heated. She felt the intensity of someone’s gaze.

Ji-heon’s eyes seemed to be staring directly at her, making Jeong Oh swallow hard.

Should I hit him on the back of the head? Maybe then today’s memories will disappear?

“If he’s my man…”

If only she could erase those five syllables from his memory, it would make things a bit more bearable.

In a situation where she had to try to revive his memories, she was also trying to erase another one. It was truly a tragedy.

“Director, is there something you want to say to me…?”

Jeong Oh asked, dragging out her words.

“I heard you went to Soritelcom. Does it align with the current production direction?”

He asked casually.

“Yes. The CEO of Soritelcom loves storytelling. It seems we can prepare it well according to plan.”

“Got it.”

Tap, tap.

He lightly tapped the table with his fingertips after his brief response.

Every hair on her body stood on end. She felt heat pooling at the tip of her nose.

His fingertips. His voice. His gaze.

None of these were direct threats, yet Jeong Oh felt completely paralyzed, unable to move.

This man is angry.

Because of Cha Eun-bi's lies, I've pulled this man back into the realm of delusion. I shouldn't have said that.

Jeong Oh lost the will to resist.

"Well then, I'll call you again next time."

He said politely as he returned the document he had received from Assistant Ko. Jeong Oh, along with the trio, moved heavily, her feet seemingly glued to the ground.

And in that last step.

Click.

The moment the door closed behind her, Gi-hoon turned around. The only people who came out of the office were Gi-hoon and Eun-joo.

"Oh? Assistant Lee didn't come out."

"Maybe she has something urgent to discuss."

"Shouldn't we stay to protect her?"

"We've done enough. Let's go."

Eun-joo walked ahead down the hallway.

The door quietly locked from the inside.

…Locked.

In that stillness, only suffocating tension filled the air.

Left behind in the office of her own accord, Jeong Oh found herself trapped between the exit and Ji-heon’s presence.

She carefully tried to speak.

“Director, what I said earlier was…”

“Whose man am I?”

However, before she could finish, he interrupted her.

As expected, he pointed out that phrase first. She was so sorry that she couldn’t bring herself to speak any further.

“If you claim him as yours, then you need to take responsibility.”

Jeong Oh slowly shook her head.

No, no, he’s not mine. Jeong Ji-heon belongs to Jeong Ji-heon…

“What courage made you say something like that?”

Ji-heon casually threw out the words, watching her reaction.

He had learned a few of her habits over time.

When she was at a loss for words, her mind would start to race.

There were moments when her eyes darted left and right as if she were tapping a calculator in her head.

He wanted to seize that gap. He wanted her to think only of him.

Ji-heon quickly lowered his head and deeply kissed her lips, then pulled away.

He didn’t ask. She was the one who made him hers. If he said, “I’m yours,” it would all be settled.

He’s my man. I am.

After the brief kiss, she looked even more dazed.

The opportunist Jeong Ji-heon would never let this moment slip away. He lowered his head again.

Tap.

But, just like that time in front of the katsu restaurant, a slap flew toward his lips.

Jeong Oh immediately sensed that something had gone wrong. Her plan to start as friends had shattered. Perhaps she should have picked up on it the day he kissed her hand.

She didn’t know what kind of person he was, and seeing so many different sides of him from seven years ago made her cautious, leading her not to consider something so simple.

That this man still saw her as a woman.

That he was approaching her with a side of himself he had never shown to Cha Eun-bi.

Tears welled in her eyes from the confusion.

But even so, she couldn’t let her guard down. She was a realistic person.

Tap.

She slapped his lips once more before pushing him away recklessly.

As he was pushed back, he truly felt like hers. It was so easy that it startled her.

She just wanted to regain her composure.

“You’re the one who’s in the wrong.”

She glared at him with fierce eyes, speaking seriously.

“No matter how urgent the situation was, you shouldn’t have done that. You can be a fake boyfriend, but not a fake marriage promise; it’s not okay. Both are wrong, both!”

From the beginning, you were the one at fault.

You shouldn’t have done that. Your decision must have been torture for Eun-bi.

He had been pushed back all the way to the edge of the sofa, leaning against the backrest. As he leaned forward, their eyes met perfectly.

She was so earnest, yet he was still smiling.

A gentle smile that seemed to embrace the whole world pierced through her heart.

It was impossible not to feel her heart soften.

Flustered, she began to stammer.

“So, so… until the Cha Eun-bi issue is resolved, you need to reflect.”

“Got it.”

“Again, again! You can’t just say you understand without a care, then lie, and when that gets found out, enjoy it.”

Despite her frustration, his eyes sparkled with delight.

“Got it.”

“Ugh. Seriously. This isn’t a time to be smiling. What do you understand?”

“I know.”

“…”

“It’s about how you, Jeong Oh, have been speaking less.”

With that response, he came back to kiss her again. As he closed his eyelids and obsessively sought her lips, his determination hadn’t changed at all from seven years ago.

Ch47 - The People Who Know Her

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Clink, clink.

With Da-yoon finally taking a nap, the house fell silent, and the sound of water splashing on the dishes echoed clearly.

Amidst that, Jin-seo’s sighs blended in.

After arriving at the hospital yesterday, Jin-seo regained consciousness and had to undergo several tests in her disoriented state. In the end, she was guided to the emergency room in the obstetrics department. There, she received unexpected news.

“You’re having a third child?”

So that’s why I felt so down.

Our bodies are so honest.

The lack of energy, occasional dizziness, and loss of appetite over the past few days all pointed to pregnancy. The baby was already building a tiny home inside her womb, thumping away with a heartbeat.

Even after hearing the heartbeat, Jin-seo couldn’t believe it.

“A third child…”

Children grow up so fast. A mother can’t keep up with how quickly they grow.

Even though she felt like a mother who was lagging behind, she was still trying.

She hadn’t yet been a good mother to her two children, and now another one was on the way.

Next year, Do-bin will start elementary school, and will I be chasing after him with a big belly? What if the third child is born on the day of the entrance ceremony?

Just imagining that day made her heart sink.

So this is why I collapsed. Instincts can be so terrifying.

“A third child…”

After finishing the dishes, Seung-kyu quietly observed Jin-seo’s mumbled complaints as he sat beside her. He took a day off work to care for Jin-seo, but he couldn’t find the right words to say.

“A third child for us…”

“…”

“I’m sure I’m not the only one struggling, right? You’re probably having a hard time too.”

Seung-kyu felt uneasy hearing Jin-seo’s flat and expressionless voice.

“Honey, I made a mistake…”

“A mistake? The baby can hear you. Don’t say things like that.”

Though she pointed it out to him, there was no liveliness in her tone.

“Children are a blessing.”

“…”

“When Do-bin enters puberty, the third one will be as big as Do-yoon.”

Seung-kyu lowered his head and swallowed dryly.

He couldn’t understand how things had come to this. The first child was actually a result of an unplanned pregnancy, and they had started their married life without any proper preparation, leaving Seung-kyu feeling perpetually guilty toward Jin-seo. And now there was a third child on the way.

“Honey, I’ll do well. I can take parental leave or whatever. I’ll do anything. Don’t worry too much.”

If only he could do anything, he would have wanted to ask her to give birth to the child in his place.

That was what he felt, but Jin-seo managed a weak smile.

It felt like life changed with every child born.

Now it felt like she was entering her fourth life.

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The hand that had been playfully tapping him was suddenly held. Ji-heon grabbed Jeong Oh’s two hands with one of his and lowered his head, easily leaning in for a kiss.

Jeong Oh closed her eyes, unsure of what to do. A tear that had been pooling at the corners of her eyes slipped out. She felt his lips touch the corner of her eye, and she flinched.

His lips, which had been kissing her like they were tasting her eyelashes, moved downwards.

The kisses, initially similar to the one on her hand, became deeper and more lingering. When he finally reached her lips again, he swallowed them without hesitation. He held her tightly as her legs began to weaken.

He was just like he had been seven years ago. No, he had become even more reckless and greedy. His hands, his gaze, his breath—all were those of a wicked man. His rough breath flooded into her, as if he had decided there was no need to maintain appearances.

Every time she squirmed in his arms, his breath grew heavier. It was as if he was trying to fill her up with his breath, leaving no room for anything else.

She had boldly declared him to be hers, but now it felt like he had her heart in his grasp.

She reminded herself not to fall too deeply for him, not to get too swept away, as her mind raced with the thoughts, but the sensations he was giving her were overwhelming and made her tremble, leaving Jeong Oh with a tear-streaked face as her lips remained pressed together.

Her racing heart kept interrupting her thoughts.

What should I really do? Why is it beating so fast? Can’t you slow down a bit? I’m a person with kids! This is a children’s zone! I need you to go slow!

But then again, if I hide the sign and give a warning, it wouldn’t sound like a warning at all.

He was moving too fast for her to trust him completely. Yet, at the same time, she wanted to believe in him.

Ji-heon’s large hand grasped the back of her neck and pulled her closer. As she was pushed back, she willingly succumbed to his hold. The warmth of his fingertips pressing against her scalp was constant.

There had been moments in the past when death had felt so easy.

For the first time, Ji-heon felt grateful to be alive and healthy like this.

The sight of her trying to remain composed in the face of temptation stirred something deep within him.

He knew what she was worried about.

But that didn’t mean he could stop. The charm of Jeong Oh had already exceeded any limits. He couldn’t maintain his composure like a gentleman in front of her.

He could no longer hide the primal heat building inside him.

Still, she had accepted his advances, even while wielding her fiery hands.

Her soft lips and the warm breath within them felt intoxicatingly pleasant.

“But I’m not your man yet, am I?” he asked, leaning closer and releasing his breath right in front of her lips.

“Make me yours quickly,” she replied.

Thinking he was just teasing her, she shot him a sidelong glance. Even that was so cute that it made him smile.

“Make me yours.”

Though she didn’t know exactly how to give herself to him, she would give him everything he asked for.

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After parting ways with Ji-heon, Eun-yeob contacted her sister Eun-bi. They met secretly, away from the Max Planning building.

As soon as Eun-yeob saw her sister, she furrowed her brows and asked sharply, “What did you do to Jeong Ji-heon? What did you say to make him so fed up that he wants to end this fake relationship?”

Tears welled up in Eun-bi’s eyes.

“Is Ji-heon like that? Really? He has a completely fed-up look on his face?”

“What on earth happened?”

Eun-yeob shouted without caring about anything else.

Her younger sister’s successful marriage.

In fact, Eun-yeob thought her sister would achieve that goal before turning thirty. However, the barrier created by Jeong Ji-heon turned out to be unexpectedly high and solid.

If she had invested in someone else, her sister would have probably been married by now.

Somehow, time had slipped away like this. At some point, it had become a matter of pride for Eun-yeob.

Having come this far, she had to get her sister married to Ji-heon no matter what. There was no turning back now.

Eun-bi, shaking her shoulders, finally revealed the truth along with a tear.

“It’s because of that girl.”

“That girl?”

“After she joined the company, oppa started acting strange. She keeps flirting with Ji-heon oppa. She told him he looked like her dad one moment and then like her ex-boyfriend the next… she keeps doing that. She follows him around and tries to stick to him in any way possible…”

“Jeong Ji-heon isn’t the type to fall for someone just because they flirt!”

“That’s why it’s strange!”

Eun-bi raised her voice as words failed her. And then she said,

“You handle it.”

“……”

“All the girls who flirted with Ji-heon were taken care of by you. You’re good at that sort of thing, right?”

She clung to her brother.

Eun-bi knew that it was her brother, Eun-yeob, who had spread all sorts of rumors about Ji-heon four years ago. By effectively conveying those rumors to Lady Jang Young-mi, he had made Ji-heon cooperate with the fake relationship.

Since then, Eun-yeob had been tirelessly working to block any woman who showed signs of trying to cling to Ji-heon.

“Do something! Tempt her or play with her or whatever!”

Eun-bi shouted. It was the first time Eun-yeob had seen her sister so desperate. He began to take her seriously.

“What’s that girl’s name?”

“Lee Jeong-oh.”

“……”

“Copywriter Lee Jeong-oh from the Production Team 2.”

Lee Jeong-oh.

Eun-yeob’s eyes widened when he heard that name.

He had heard that name before.

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Eun-bi was anxious. Time was of the essence. Just then, she received a call from a headhunter.

Skipping overtime, Eun-bi left work early to meet the headhunter. The meeting place was quite far away, but she willingly endured the hassle of

having to move around.

“Manager Chae Eun-bi.”

As she entered the café, the headhunter waved. A woman in a suit was sitting next to him. She was the target.

“Manager, this is the AE I mentioned. This is Deputy Manager Nam Ji-ae.”

“Hello, I’m Chae Eun-bi from Max Planning.”

Following the headhunter’s introduction, Eun-bi cheerfully greeted the AE and quickly got to the point.

“Actually, I’m not sure if you know this, but my boyfriend is the head of Max Planning. We ended up working in the same department, and it’s been a bit uncomfortable in many ways. I enjoy working, but I feel a bit disappointed that I can’t be recognized purely for my own abilities. So, I’ve been considering a job change. I heard that Two H is a great workplace, and I’m looking into it.”

The headhunter and the AE smiled and began talking about the company. All the information was unnecessary for Eun-bi, but she diligently nodded along to their words.

“Thank you for the information you shared today. It seems very helpful. I’ll reach out again soon.”

“Yes, Manager. It was nice to meet you. I’ll be waiting for good news.”

The AE responded cheerfully to Eun-bi’s farewell.

As she passed by the AE, Eun-bi casually mentioned her real purpose.

“Oh, by the way, Lee Jeong-oh is a colleague of yours, right?”

“Oh, Lee Jeong-oh? Ah! Max Planning acquired Ivory Planning, right? So, Lee Jeong-oh is over there at Max Planning?”

The AE’s eyes sparkled at the exciting topic. Eun-bi cheered internally.

“Yes. I’m in Production Team 1, and Lee Jeong-oh is in Team 2.”

“Is she doing well? Lee Jeong-oh.”

“Yes, it seems like she’s doing fine.”

“She’s a really bright talent.”

“It seems that way.”

Eun-bi felt nauseous at the praise for Jeong-oh but forced a polite smile.

“She does her job well, she’s pretty, and she’s smart. This is a secret, but there have been advertisers who occasionally had a crush on Lee Jeong-oh. If she didn’t have a child, she would have received a ton of proposals.”

“……She has a child? Lee Jeong-oh?”

“Huh? You didn’t know? Oh… am I not supposed to say this?”

Joy filled Eun-bi’s eyes.

There was a hole in the sky, even if it felt like the sky was falling!

“It’s okay. Please tell me. I have no one to spread rumors to.”

“She has an incredibly cute daughter. The child is probably seven years old now.”

A thrill ran through Eun-bi from head to toe. She couldn’t hide her joyful smile.

How dare she, a mother, touch my man?

‘This is it, this is it!’

Thinking about how to expose this fact made her heart race. Little did she know, it was like opening Pandora’s box.

Ch48 - You Look Good

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Even after leaving Ji-heon's office, Jeong-oh's heart continued to race. The sensation of blood rushing through her veins made her feel dizzy.

If his secretary hadn't reminded her of the next schedule, she thought she might still be trapped in his office, causing her knees to tremble.

'How could he have lived like that for seven years…'

…so brazenly.

Just the way he looked at her was enough to take her breath away, and with his gaze and touch, she was unable to regain her senses.

In a conversation she had overheard between Ji-heon and Eun-bi, Eun-bi mentioned that Ji-heon didn't have a girlfriend.

Did he not have a girlfriend but just dated around a lot? Did he casually flirt with many women?

Somehow, that seemed likely. If not, it was impossible to explain his cunning ways.

It felt like many things had changed, not just his cunning. Or should she say it had changed?

It was as if the level of his abilities had soared, making him seem like a different person.

Stronger, more aggressive, more relentless, and more provocative.

In any case, Jeong Ji-heon had changed a lot. Among the changes, glimpses of the Ji-heon from seven years ago occasionally surprised her.

What had changed had changed, and what hadn’t changed hadn’t changed, leaving Jeong-oh feeling trapped by him.

As before, she was surprised by herself once again.

In truth, Jeong-oh had once resented him so much that she had tried to erase her memories of him. Given her efforts, she must have forgotten quite a bit.

Nevertheless, some things remained etched in her body that she could never erase. Just like a retired ballerina can still perform the same choreography to the same music decades later, she realized she still reacted the same way to his actions.

‘Ji-heon must feel really good right now, having me move as if I were his.’

That thought stung a little. She must have unintentionally given him a sense of satisfaction.

But time couldn’t be turned back, and what had happened was unavoidable. Jeong-oh knew she had to start thinking about the future again. She had to strategize.

It was clear that Lady Jang Young-mi disliked her.

If she knew about Yena’s existence, her approaching Ji-heon might provoke her feelings.

It could even harm Yena.

But what if she hadn’t known about Yena until now?

She might hope to take Yena away while keeping her distance.

‘First, I need to meet a lawyer.’

In case she lost Yena, she had to act quickly.

As various scenarios began to fill her mind, her phone vibrated.

‘Oh!’

Jeong-oh checked the text that appeared on her phone and immediately turned off the screen.

– I’ll be back at the office. Let’s leave together. I’ll walk you home.

This man really has no sense of caution!

It seemed urgent to warn Ji-heon.

– No! I’m going home alone! And while we’re at the office, let’s absolutely NOT contact each other personally! Don’t let it show at work, either!!!!!!

With a sigh, Jeong-oh pressed the send button.

It felt like a countdown had begun. As she thought about the future, her heart raced with both excitement and fear.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Despite the secret rendezvous in the office, as soon as she parted ways, he found himself wanting to see her again.

Throughout the day out of the office, Ji-heon couldn’t stop thinking about Jeong-oh.

Having lived a life where he often spaced out, he managed to work without much trouble. As Seung-kyu said, he only needed to put in 80% effort for things to go smoothly. He could handle tasks effortlessly while expending minimal energy.

The previously dull hours suddenly felt fully occupied. It was as if a long-dormant heart had awakened. That unfamiliar feeling invigorated his work.

“Director, it seems like something good is happening. Your face looks unusually bright today.”

An executive from the client company, a subsidiary of the Seoryun Group, approached Ji-heon with a friendly inquiry. Normally, he would have answered with a vague “No, it’s nothing,” but today he responded cheerfully.

“Does it really seem that way?”

“Yes, you look much better.”

“Thank you. The staff have been doing a great job, so I’ve been feeling good lately.”

Ji-heon deftly deflected attention from his personal life and redirected the conversation to his employees.

While on the move, he sent a text message to Jeong-oh, and she promptly replied with a message containing ten exclamation marks. It was a cute message that made him feel as if he could hear her voice beside him.

Ji-heon agreed with her reminder not to let their feelings show at work. Given the complications with Chae Eun-bi, and the fact that Eun-bi mistakenly believed Jeong-oh was interfering between them, he couldn’t reveal his feelings carelessly.

As he momentarily reminisced about his time with Jeong-oh, the executive spoke up again.

“Oh, Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob had suggested something to me once, but I forgot about it after saying I’d look into it. It was a very convincing idea. Could I ask about it now?”

“Is that so? I’ll ask him right away.”

Ji-heon immediately picked up his phone to call the head of Production Team 1. However, Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob didn’t answer.

Thinking he should ask other team members, he hesitated for a moment before dialing the internal number for Production Team 1 but then hesitated and hung up.

Since it was a nearby team, it felt appropriate to ask Jeong-oh instead.

– Is Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob not in? I can’t get in touch with him.

After sending the text, he received a prompt reply.

– He’s not here. Should I let you know as soon as I meet him?

– Yes, please do. Is there no one in Production Team 1 right now?

Ji-heon found himself smiling at the exchange, which was more entertaining than his conversation with the executive in front of him. He felt a growing desire to keep receiving replies. That desire was encapsulated in a question mark. Then, he received another message.

– Everyone is out.

Ji-heon blinked at the bizarre three-word text message.

A moment later, a series of new messages arrived from Jeong-oh.

– There’s no one here, no one, no one!!!!

– I’m telling you, everyone is gone!!!!!

He couldn’t help but stifle a laugh that threatened to escape through his tightly pressed lips.

Just looking at the messages was loud. It felt as though he could hear her shouting.

In the midst of handling work, she had accidentally sent a message with a typo. That mistake was so embarrassing that she must have hurriedly sent a correction.

“It seems like there are some amusing things happening.”

The executive noted Ji-heon’s expression and spoke up again.

“Your employee made a typo in a text message, and it’s quite funny.”

“Oh, you were laughing at the typo from my employee?”

“I apologize.”

Ji-heon barely managed to suppress his laughter, straightening his back to sit up properly. The executive smiled approvingly at him.

“It’s fine. Other executives tend to scold employees for typos in messages, but you’re different, Director. I’m quite envious of the staff in your division.”

Thanks to Jeong-oh, he received an unexpected compliment.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Jeong-oh kicked the air a few times at her desk, recalling her mistake.

After being in a daze all day, she had even made a typo in the text message she sent to Ji-heon.

She wanted to be capable, intelligent, and flawless, but she felt pathetic for continually revealing her shortcomings to Ji-heon. She worried that she might accidentally let slip the existence of Ye-na.

Chae Eun-bi hadn’t shown up for work even during the overtime. In the morning, she seemed eager to work hard, but by the evening, she claimed to be feeling unwell and left.

It was understandable.

‘I pushed her too hard, so she must feel upset.’

That said, she had no intention of apologizing or taking back her words, but she did feel a bit sorry for Eun-bi’s situation.

“Assistant Lee, here’s the proposal for collaboration with the subsidiary that the director mentioned earlier. I’ve thought of a few ideas—what do you

think?”

An employee from the planning team handed Jeong-oh a thick document. After reviewing the entire document, she shared her thoughts.

“They’re all great! The ideas shine brightly. I think it would be good to show everything to the director. Since he said he would propose it directly, I believe he’ll make a practical judgment.”

“Ah, thank you. If I show this to him, will I also have to work overtime next to the director?”

“Do you want to?”

“No, not at all.”

The employee AE shook her head vigorously, her cheeks trembling.

Just then, Ji-heon’s figure appeared from the far end of the hallway. He had returned from an off-site work meeting late at night.

Jeong-oh’s expression stiffened.

She contemplated whether to gradually sneak away, but Ji-heon stopped right in front of her and addressed the nearby employees.

“Let’s not stay any later today; it’s already late.”

It was 8 PM. The expressions of the employees, who had expected to work until at least 10, brightened at the director’s directive. Even the team leader had no choice but to comply. Mi-ran spoke to everyone.

“Let’s wrap things up for today.”

Upon Mi-ran’s words, the team members responded energetically and began to tidy up their spaces. Jeong-oh crossed over to the conference room to clear up the mess that had accumulated. Ji-heon followed her all the way to the conference room.

“Don’t copywriters need to send proper messages?”

Jeong-oh’s hands, which had been organizing her laptop, came to a halt.

He was supposed to keep a low profile at the office, yet here he was, playfully teasing her from a distance instead of getting too close like he did in the office.

“Or did I write it properly, but you just didn’t get it?”

When she shot him a sulky glance, Ji-heon approached and took her laptop.

“Just don’t let it show at work, right?”

“…….”

“Let’s hurry up. I’ll give you a ride.”

Ji-heon gathered not only her laptop but also another one from a colleague before stepping out of the conference room.

Jeong-oh sighed. She had clearly told him via text that she would be going home alone, yet it seemed like he had either forgotten or was doing this on purpose. She hurried to catch up with Ji-heon, who smiled back at her, urging her to come quickly.

But Jeong-oh couldn’t keep up any longer; she spotted Chae Eun-bi walking toward her.

Where had she been hiding, only to appear again at this hour?

Eun-bi, who had looked exhausted when leaving earlier, now came back with a completely recovered face and announced to everyone, “Oh my, are you all leaving now? I took some medicine and felt better, so I came back. I was really bothered by not being able to participate.”

“Come on, you should still take a break. It’s late, and everyone else is leaving, so you should too, Manager Chae.”

Mi-ran kindly urged Eun-bi.

“I guess you’re right. I’ll work hard again starting tomorrow. Sorry, Team Leader.”

Eun-bi greeted them cheerfully.

Jeong-oh returned to her seat, thinking about how good Eun-bi was at hitching a ride on others’ success and how lucky she seemed.

Ji-heon didn’t even glance at Eun-bi as he placed the laptops he had brought from the production team onto the table.

“Director Lee Jeong-oh, your daughter must be happy that her mom is coming home early.”

Suddenly, Eun-bi called out to Jeong-oh with a bright smile.

Jeong-oh’s heart sank.

“Daughter?”

Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob stood up and asked, looking at her.

Everyone’s attention turned to Eun-bi and Jeong-oh.

Unfazed, Eun-bi continued, “I have a friend who used to work with Director Lee at her previous company. She told me there’s a beautiful seven-year-old girl.”

Jeong-oh glanced at Ji-heon.

He remained unmoved. His feet were firmly planted on the ground, and his expression showed no emotion. That made Jeong-oh feel even more terrified.

There had been one chance.

The day he offered to drive her home, he had asked if she lived with her mother, and she had answered affirmatively.

If she had known this would happen, she would have revealed that she had a daughter back then.

Of course, if she had mentioned it first, he might not have approached her as boldly as he did now, but at least she wouldn't have had to be a liar.

"Team Leader, I think this competition presentation will go well. It's a storytelling about a mother and daughter. No one understands a mother's heart better than Director Lee Jeong-oh."

Eun-bi's cheerful words pierced through her.

Jeong-oh could guess why Eun-bi had been absent for two hours. She must have met with a former colleague of Jeong-oh's to dig up information about her past and weaknesses.

Few people in her previous workplace knew much about her family, so Eun-bi probably heard a sensationalized version of her story, edited for drama.

The reason for her return was obvious. She must have been itching to reveal this information as soon as possible.

Eun-bi continued to chatter happily. "I thought Director Lee Jeong-oh was so pretty that she was single. Who would have thought she had a seven-year-old daughter?"

The cold expression on Ji-heon's face came into Jeong-oh's view.

After a moment of hesitation, he slowly resumed walking.

Trust had been broken.

The further away he moved, the hazier her feelings seemed to become.

For now, there was nothing she could do about it. The consequences of her lie were hers to bear.

“I am single. I have a child, but I’m not married.”

Jeong-oh revealed the truth with a calm expression.

“I’m a single mom.”

The pain of her past, having gone through a world-shattering experience, was not insignificant in helping her navigate life. Jeong-oh refused to fall into despair carelessly.

“Chae Eun-bi, you’re going to regret today someday.”

Ch49 - A Man Who Cannot Be Mine

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Jeong-oh’s voice made Ji-heon stop in his tracks.

When Jeong-oh confessed that she was a single mom, Eun-bi’s expression suddenly darkened.

“Ah… you’re a single mother? I’m sorry, I didn’t know that…”

Even that apology must be a calculated move.

“It’s okay. There’s no need to apologize. I don’t see it as a flaw. As you mentioned, my daughter is beautiful.”

“Director Lee is so cool. You’re brave. I don’t think I could have made such a decision. But anyway, it must be wonderful to have such a pretty daughter. You’re truly amazing.”

Eun-bi’s sympathetic smile made Jeong-oh want to laugh, but she didn’t show it.

An awkward silence filled the office. The members of the Production Team 1, who had been watching Jeong-oh, quietly averted their gazes.

Assistant Ko Eun-joo frowned in displeasure and shot a glance at Eun-bi. Gi-hoon momentarily looked dazed before turning to Jeong-oh with a worried expression.

Jeong-oh looked at Ji-heon. His expression revealed no emotion, leaving her to guess his thoughts.

Team Leader Seong Mi-ran quickly grasped how to handle the situation and went after Ji-heon.

“Director, I need to discuss something regarding the PT. Do you have a moment?”

“Let’s go.”

At Mi-ran’s request for a meeting, Ji-heon readily led the way. Even as the sound of his footsteps faded, Jeong-oh felt a piercing pain in her heart with every step he took.

“Director, you’re going home, right? I’ll give you a ride. Let’s go.”

A little while later, Gi-hoon confidently offered.

“Uh, yeah. Thanks.”

Gi-hoon even helped carry Jeong-oh’s bag.

Ji-heon went to his office with Seong Mi-ran.

Mi-ran wondered why Ji-heon was just walking without checking what she needed to discuss. Moreover, his steps felt strangely slow and heavy, as if he had weights tied to his ankles, his mind seemingly elsewhere.

With those slow steps, Ji-heon silently opened the office door, letting Mi-ran in while he stood holding the door.

“Director, the thing is, in this PT, Chae Eun-bi…”

“Hold on a second. Just a moment.”

As Mi-ran began to speak, Ji-heon reopened the door he had just started to close. Without giving her a chance to continue, he left the office.

His pace quickened as he walked away from the office. Striding quickly, he reached the Production Team 2 office and confirmed that Jeong-oh's desk was empty before heading outside.

When the entrance door to the 9th floor opened, he heard a voice coming from in front of the elevator.

"Are you okay, Director?"

"Of course."

Jeong-oh's calm voice contrasted with Gi-hoon's worried tone.

"Well, that's a relief. Ugh, I'm so angry."

"Why are you getting worked up, Gi-hoon?"

"Chae Eun-bi is really awful. I didn't think she would go that far."

"……"

"Whew. I never thought it would come out like this. I wanted to protect you."

"I'm really okay. Thank you for worrying about me."

"Should we go down to the parking lot together, or do you want to wait on the first floor?"

"Let's go down together."

While their conversation continued, Ji-heon's fists clenched tightly.

The office fell silent again.

Eun-bi, filled with joy at having dealt a blow to Jeong-oh, sat down at her desk.

Since the PT preparation meeting seemed to be over, it would be fine to go home right away, but Eun-bi wanted to talk to Ji-heon.

She wanted to tell him in more detail what she had heard and see the shock and hurt on his face.

“If you don’t know anything properly, just stay quiet.”

Assistant Ko Eun-joo grumbled as she packed her things. It was a mutter to herself, but it was clearly directed at someone. Eun-bi instantly recognized that it was aimed at her.

How could the Production Team 2 be so collectively foolish? They were like idiots boarding a sinking ship without realizing it.

Eun-bi thought it wasn’t even worth getting angry over and pretended to organize her work as she sat down.

A little later, Mi-ran appeared, seemingly finished with her meeting with Ji-heon. Soon after, Eun-bi’s internal phone rang.

“Yes, this is Chae Eun-bi.”

“Can I see you for a moment, Chae Eun-bi?” It was Ji-heon’s voice.

“Yes, understood, Director.”

After cheerfully responding, Eun-bi hung up the phone and hummed a little tune as she headed for the office.

At the end of the hallway leading to the office, she spotted Ji-heon, who seemed to be approaching without the need to go all the way to the office.

Feeling uneasy, Eun-bi’s steps halted as Ji-heon drew closer.

“There’s no need for the Sound Telecom competitive PT anymore. You’ve been excluded.”

“Uh… why?”

“Because it’s not necessary. Just accept that and focus on your main job.”

So that was what Mi-ran’s meeting had been about. Although her pride was slightly hurt, Eun-bi quickly agreed. She wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about the competitive PT where Production Team 2 would take the lead either.

“Got it. Is that all?”

“Am I yours?”

Ji-heon shot back a question at Eun-bi’s inquiry. His tone was so confrontational that Eun-bi responded with a stiff expression.

“…Huh?”

“You told Jeong-oh, didn’t you? ‘Am I yours?’”

Ji-heon pointedly repeated his question.

In the company hallway, where anyone could easily eavesdrop, Eun-bi felt anxious about someone overhearing Ji-heon’s voice, but he seemed completely unconcerned.

Tears welled up in her eyes again.

“Did Jeong-oh say that?”

“I heard it directly. Right in front of the restaurant.”

So it wasn’t just me!

Jeong-oh had also said something about being ‘my man’ or whatever!

And after hearing all that, he only targets me? He just laughed at Jeong-oh a moment ago!

“After telling you to sort out all the lies you’ve told, you’re spreading even stranger rumors.”

“……”

“If you keep tarnishing my reputation, I’ll have to resolve this legally.”

Eun-bi’s hands began to tremble at his merciless words.

Moreover, how dare he talk about the law to someone from a family of lawyers?

With tears welling in her eyes, Eun-bi asked, “But, oppa, isn’t there anything you’re thankful for?”

In response to Eun-bi’s accusatory tone, Ji-heon tilted his head and crossed his arms.

“Shouldn’t you be thankful? Jeong-oh was just saying that you’re her man. What about the woman who has been lying to you like it’s nothing, as a single mother? You don’t think you should thank me for revealing what kind of person she is?”

Just as Ji-heon had done, Eun-bi didn’t care about her surroundings as she pressed him.

After delivering her words forcefully, she saw that his expression had turned even more terrifying.

Taking half a step closer, Ji-heon spoke quietly, “Shut your mouth. Okay?”

It was a rough and chilling warning delivered in a disturbingly polite tone.

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Late at night, Jeong-oh lay beside her sleeping daughter, Yena, gently brushing her hair.

Even though she had come home earlier than usual, she couldn’t show Yena a bright face.

I’m sorry. Mom is sorry.

Mom is always sorry to her daughter.

It had been a rollercoaster of a day.

Her heart had dropped, soared, and now felt like it was crashing down.

Having tasted the bitterness of life many times, she realized that the bitterness comes in many forms. But today, she didn't cry.

Jeong Ji-heon was a man who could never be hers. He always had been. Perhaps due to that resignation, she didn't feel utterly hopeless.

'It doesn't matter.'

Jeong-oh steeled her heart. She felt a bit uneasy that he seemed to be pressing forward without any reservations.

Now that the brakes had been applied, he would probably keep his distance again. Given the current situation, that might be for the best. After all, being associated with the rumors of Chae Eun-bi and Jeong Ji-heon breaking up could be risky.

While she was sorting out various thoughts in her mind, her phone vibrated. The screen displayed the name of Team Leader Seong Mi-ran.

"Yes, Team Leader."

"Is this assistant okay?" Mi-ran asked with a concerned voice.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"I spoke to the Director. It would be best to exclude Chae from our competitive PT since she's not much help."

"Oh, really?"

"The Director also agreed. Today, Chae was quite rude. From what I hear, she and the Director have broken up. I wonder if she's taking her frustration out on you."

“……”

“Still, stay away from the rumors, Assistant.” Mi-ran briefly explained what had happened that night and added a word of caution. Jeong-oh let out a weak laugh.

“Yes. I will.”

“I feel like I’m overstepping, but I’m doing this because I’m worried you might get hurt. After some time has passed, after they’ve settled things, then you’ll feel more at ease.”

“Yes, you don’t have to worry, Team Leader.”

“Oh dear. Okay, get some sleep.”

“Yes, you should rest too, Team Leader.”

Jeong-oh quickly said goodbye and hung up the phone.

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Although he had given Eun-bi a warning, Ji-heon couldn’t just stand by.

On his way home, he called Eun-yeob.

“Oh, Ji-heon. What’s up?” Eun-yeob answered cheerfully. Ji-heon went straight to the point.

“Did you meet Eun-bi today?”

“……Did Eun-bi tell you?”

“No. I just thought so. Did you talk properly?”

“What about?”

“Tell her not to spread rumors.”

As Eun-yeob received Ji-heon’s call while working late, the smile vanished from her face.

[You’re my brother, so I’ll listen to you a bit. I told you clearly last week, but she’s still going around saying I’m her man. You know that’s defamation, right?]
How dare he bring up defamation in front of a lawyer? Truly an arrogant kid.

Eun-yeob silently scoffed but responded kindly without showing her feelings.
“I’ll say it again.”

[Thanks. I’m counting on you. Oh, and I just recorded this call. Understand?]
“That you would record a conversation between friends is quite hurtful.”

[After being treated like this by your friend’s sister, I find the world quite frightening.]
“……”

[Then I’ll hang up. Take care.]
Click.

It was an unpleasant call from start to finish.

After the call ended, Eun-yeob, unable to suppress her anger, swung her arms and knocked everything off her desk.

Crash! Papers, documents, and other items fell, creating a loud mess.

The office assistant was startled and opened the door. Eun-yeob shot a cold glance at the assistant before stepping out of the office and said, “Clean it up.”

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Seven years ago.

Eun-yeob learned that Ji-heon's mother, Jang Young-mi, was searching for a young male voice actor.

Considering Ji-heon was in a coma from a hit-and-run accident, Young-mi's actions were even more puzzling.

Afterward, Eun-yeob secretly approached the voice actor under the guise of a coincidence. After planning his movements and having a chance meeting about three times, she was able to become friends with him.

"I joined a law firm and mostly provide counsel to large corporations, but it seems like the children of the group chairmen are all troublemakers. It's really tough. Have you ever met anyone from a chaebol family?"

"There are a lot of weird people in chaebol families. I don't have personal connections, but I did visit a chaebol mansion recently for work."

Once Eun-yeob broke the ice, the voice actor began to spill information. Eun-yeob's eyes lit up.

"You visited a chaebol mansion? For what?"

"Well, you must not tell anyone, okay?"

"Of course. Confidentiality is essential for a lawyer."

The voice actor lowered his voice.

"They said it was a food group, but I thought it would be rude to ask which one. Anyway, when you enter the mansion, there's a marble fountain right in front."

A food group with a marble fountain? Eun-yeob easily deduced that it was Ji-heon's home.

"I had been in contact with the lady of the house, and after we exchanged a few messages, I was called to go. But I received a really strange request."

"What kind of request?"

“They handed me a phone and asked me to call a woman I had never met before and say some harsh words. There was a script, too. Things like, ‘Can you please not contact me anymore since it’s too burdensome?’ and ‘You should be prepared if you contact me again.’ You get the idea, right?”

Eun-yeob felt chills run down her spine.

The voice the actor had performed was unmistakably Ji-heon’s.

“The woman was clinging to the house’s son, but since the son couldn’t make the call, they wanted me to pretend to be him and chase her away.”

“……Was it just that one time? No other requests?”

“Since then, I haven’t heard from them. I wonder if my acting was effective, and if that woman really backed off.”

“Indeed, chaebols are something else. To demand such words to a woman whose name and face they don’t even know.”

“I at least know her name. I remember it.”

Eun-yeob’s eyes narrowed at the voice actor’s response.

“It was Lee Jeong-o. That was the name.”

Ch50 - Why Mom?

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The next day, Wednesday morning.

Seung-kyu went to find Ji-heon as soon as he arrived at work. With tears welling in his eyes, he expressed his gratitude.

“Thanks to you, I was saved the other day. I really appreciate it, my dear friend.”

If Ji-heon hadn’t visited him, he might have had to take all three kids to the hospital. Just imagining it sent chills down his spine.

“It turns out I have a third child… I’m worried because my wife seems to be struggling so much.”

After expressing his thanks, he sat down and lamented his situation. However, Ji-heon showed no reaction to Seung-kyu’s woes.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Can you find out about Lee Jeong-o?”

Seung-kyu was a bit surprised by Ji-heon’s sudden request for a background check, especially since it concerned Lee Jeong-o.

“Lee Jeong-o… why?”

“I heard she has a kid. She’s a single mother.”

“Wow.”

“Just find out the basics. Who she’s living with, whether she has a man, whether she had one, and if she still does.”

“……”

“If possible, find out what kind of guy he is too.”

“……That doesn’t seem simple.”

Seung-kyu replied with a trembling voice.

However, Ji-heon didn’t retract his request.

“You’re the only person I can trust. Please.”

Seung-kyu felt flustered as he had never done a background check on anyone before, but he couldn’t say anything more. It was also the first time Ji-heon had asked him for such a favor.

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Every second Wednesday of the month was the day that Team 2, devoted to black bean noodles, celebrated their love for jjajangmyeon.

Jeong-o didn’t forget to wear his black T-shirt. Although he felt down again after yesterday, he couldn’t resist jjajangmyeon.

As his mind and outfit melded into an all-black ensemble, it felt as though he was experiencing the catharsis of black.

Walking down the hallway to the meeting room, Gi-hoon, who was also wearing a black T-shirt, approached him.

“We look like a couple dressed like this.”

“Don’t say things like that. The word that I’m a mother has already spread everywhere.”

“Maybe it’s also widely known that I like you, Deputy.”

“Ugh, you’ll get hit. Gi-hoon.”

Jeong-o playfully tapped Gi-hoon’s arm.

Gi-hoon, with his good-natured personality, just chuckled.

But the smile Jeong-o had just managed to conjure up faded quickly as Ji-heon walked by.

He passed by the two without a word, showing no signs of recognition.

Jeong-o felt a jarring sensation in his chest, like something had shattered.

It had only been a day—no, just a few hours—since he felt they had returned to being a couple.

That brief romance disappeared like a fleeting dream.

Returning to the way things were—no, returning to the way things truly were—he was alone once again. Jeong-o quickly accepted that change.

It’s okay, I’m fine.

I’m not weak enough to despair over something like this.

***

Amid the chaos, the PT presentation day was rapidly approaching. Despite having prepared perfectly, constant revisions kept cropping up, turning the final proposal from ‘final’ to ‘really really final’ and eventually to ‘totally totally totally final.’

And thus, the day of the presentation arrived.

The elite team, fully prepared, got into the vehicle.

The attendees for the presentation included the planning team leader, Seong Mi-ran, Deputy Park Young-gwang, as well as Jeong-o and Ji-heon.

As they headed to the PT location, the headquarters of Sori Telecom, Ji-heon made a few important points.

“The launch is urgent, so if we secure the advertisement, we’ll need to schedule the shoot right away. PD, keep that in mind, and be ready to answer any questions about the filming schedule. I believe we can score points if we assure them about the overseas locations for some of the shoots.”

“Yes, Director. I’ve prepared well for that and am confident,” Deputy Park Young-gwang replied.

“I believe it will go well too,” Jeong-o added.

Ji-heon, smiling reassuringly, shared additional information.

“As you know, the CEO of Sori Telecom likes emotional connections in presentations. He has a habit of leaning forward and intently watching the presenter when the topic is interesting. If he finally likes it, he leans back in his chair and takes a relaxed posture. Pay close attention to the CEO’s reactions and manage your time wisely to achieve a good outcome.”

Jeong-o quietly nodded, focusing solely on the presentation content for the day.

Ever since it was revealed that Jeong-o was a single mother, Ji-heon hadn’t approached him privately even once. Whenever he had something to say to the presenter, he did so openly in front of everyone.

Unknowingly, Jeong-o also began to avoid Ji-heon. Following Mi-ran’s advice, he didn’t want any interaction with Ji-heon until the office rumors died down, and he wanted to concentrate on preparing for the presentation.

Jeong-o thought it was the right decision. Since then, he hadn’t faced any bullying from Eun-bi, and the preparations for the PT were going smoothly, allowing him to regain a sense of normalcy.

“You both just need to perform like you did during yesterday’s rehearsal,” Ji-heon encouraged, and Jeong-o smiled nervously. When their eyes briefly met, Jeong-o quickly looked down.

Once they arrived at the PT venue, the members were guided to the waiting room. Max Planning was the last among the three advertising agencies to present. Jeong-o noticed members from the team before them exiting the meeting room, letting out frustrated sighs.

As he exchanged glances with the presenter, the presenter smiled wryly and said, “This feels more like a pressure interview than a PT. Good luck.”

Hearing the presenter’s remark made Jeong-o even more anxious. He steeled himself and entered the meeting room.

The atmosphere was solemn, filled with stern faces. No one his age was in sight. He worried about whether he could perform well in front of the executives, who looked like they wouldn’t smile at all.

Mi-ran squeezed Jeong-o’s hand under the table. Her hand felt strangely cold, clearing his mind.

“Director Jeong Ji-heon is here in person.”

It seemed that the CEO of Sori Telecom recognized Ji-heon. Being the heir of the chairman of a sophisticated group, it made sense that they might know each other.

“Yes. Hello. I look forward to working with you,” Ji-heon briefly greeted and passed the baton to the planning team leader. The presentation commenced immediately.

While the planning team leader presented the plan, Jeong-o observed the executives’ expressions. The CEO nodded intermittently, but his facial expressions remained mostly unchanged.

Few laughed at the planning team leader’s seasoned jokes. Nonetheless, they managed to finish the presentation without any major issues.

Finally, it was Jeong-o’s turn.

Sitting down and looking at the audience was definitely different from standing up and facing them. He took in the faces of his fellow team members alongside the executives.

And there, among them, was Ji-heon.

His indifferent gaze made Jeong-o feel strangely reassured.

“Hello, I am Lee Jeong-o, a copywriter from Max Planning.”

Jeong-o began his presentation.

Jeong-o’s presentation received a better response than the proposal itself. During the presentation, the CEO of Sori Telecom leaned back in his chair, resting his chin on his hand while watching Jeong-o.

His expression remained unchanged, but his eyes showed considerable interest. Jeong-o adjusted his pacing, keeping a close watch on the CEO’s reactions.

After Jeong-o’s presentation concluded successfully, the planning team leader presented the overall schedule and media plan. As expected, questions about the filming schedule arose, and Deputy Park Young-gwang stood up to emphasize that they could guarantee overseas filming.

The planning team leader answered questions about the media adeptly. Ji-heon directly addressed the collaboration with the affiliates of the Sophisticated Group, boosting their credibility. There were no further questions about the production plan.

Just when they thought it was over, the CEO called Jeong-o.

“Copywriter Lee Jeong-o?”

“Yes.”

Jeong-o stood up from his seat.

“Can our brand show the heart of a mother?”

“…”

“What does ‘mother’ or ‘mothers’ mean to you, Jeong-o?”

This was a question about “Why Mom.”

Was this what the presenter from the competing firm meant by a pressure interview?

Jeong-o closed his mouth and thought quietly.

He thought of his mother, and then of his child who calls him “Mom.”

As he thought of his child, Ji-heon, who was looking at him, became even clearer in his mind.

Then various expressions of his child came to mind.

I love you. I love you so much.

I’m sorry.

All the things he wished he could have done better but ultimately couldn’t became a source of regret.

He recalled his mother’s face, who always said sorry.

He also remembered Jin-seo, who often expressed how she felt inadequate as a mother.

“Mothers…”

In the silence, Jeong-o finally spoke.

“They are the ones who, despite giving so much, still find themselves pained by what they couldn’t give.”

The CEO, who had been leaning back in his chair, straightened up and lowered his hands from the table.

“I am confident that Mi&Talk will be an app that shares emotions. I hope it becomes an app that looks into the love and pain of mothers embedded in the words ‘I miss you.’”

At last, the CEO relaxed his shoulders and leaned back comfortably in his chair.

With a faint smile that was barely visible, the CEO said,

“Thank you for your hard work. You may leave now.”

The members of Max Planning gathered their equipment and exited. Everyone seemed to sigh quietly, as if recalling something bittersweet.

Team leader Seong Mi-ran looked noticeably uncomfortable. Jeong-o, too, felt shaky after the pressure interview, while Ji-heon’s expression was frustratingly relieved.

“Great job, everyone. Let’s head back,” Ji-heon said to everyone. Just then, the conference room door opened again, and a man shouted,

“Max Planning members, please come back in.”

Ji-heon’s previously annoying smile deepened. He took the lead, and Jeong-o followed with wide eyes.

Upon entering the conference room, the CEO stood up and approached Ji-heon to shake his hand.

“By unanimous decision from the executives, we have chosen Max Planning.”

Ji-heon took the CEO’s hand with a welcoming smile, as if he had expected this.

“We will work hard. Thank you for your trust.”

“The schedule is tight. You need to prepare for the shoot immediately.”

“Yes, sir. I will consult with the staff.”

It was a refreshingly decisive decision. Finally able to breathe a sigh of relief, tears of gratitude welled up in Jeong-o’s eyes, feeling as though his hard work was being rewarded.

However, Team Leader Seong Mi-ran’s expression grew even worse than before. Despite the air conditioning being cold, beads of sweat were forming on her forehead.

On the way back, putting aside his happiness for a moment, Jeong-o asked Mi-ran, “Team Leader, you don’t look well. Are you feeling unwell?”

“I think I need to go to the hospital…,” Mi-ran groaned. She looked like she could collapse at any moment.

The car carrying the PT attendees headed straight to the hospital. Mi-ran was now struggling to even walk.

The others returned to the office, leaving Jeong-o to stay by Mi-ran’s side as her representative.

The diagnosis revealed acute appendicitis. An emergency surgery was performed.

When Mi-ran came out of the operating room, her face looked like it had been halved.

Jeong-o updated the worried colleagues on her condition and stayed close to Mi-ran.

Once she woke up from anesthesia, Mi-ran, still groggy, immediately checked her schedule.

“There’s a cosmetics meeting this afternoon.”

“Yes. Deputy Park Young-gwang will handle it. It seems you’ll need to be hospitalized for four days.”

“I have a business trip on Friday…”

With a sigh, Mi-ran turned her head with difficulty and spoke to Jeong-o.

“Do you have your passport?”

“I might be able to find it somewhere…”

“Then that’s good. Go there.”

“…To Australia? Me?”

“You’ve been there before, right? It should be easier since you know the place.”

“But that was seven years ago…”

“The best person for this is you. Just go.”

Jeong-o hesitated to respond, looking at Mi-ran.

“You know I used to be a copywriter, right? You’ll eventually become a CD (Creative Director) too. You’ll have to handle things like this someday.”

Even in her disoriented state, Mi-ran smiled to ease Jeong-o’s burden.

“Please do a good job. You can do it.”

After repeated persuasion from Mi-ran, Jeong-o finally accepted the mission.

He would take on the overseas schedule as her substitute for the next five days.

His heart raced with a mix of pressure and excitement.

The filming location was none other than Melbourne, Australia.

Ji-heon, the place where we first met. He was going back there again.

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With the on-air schedule tight, Deputy Park Young-gwang immediately moved into action, sharing the joy of securing the advertisement.

The overseas filming trip was confirmed for Friday, with the planning team leader, Deputy Park Young-gwang, and Lee Jeong-o leaving as representatives.

Young-gwang promptly prepared the documents and reported to Ji-heon.

“Due to Team Leader Seong Mi-ran’s surgery, Lee Jeong-o will be joining us. Jeong-o worked the hardest on the PT preparation and has experience living in Australia during her student years, so she should be helpful in many ways.”

“She lived in Australia?”

“Yes. She knows the area well near the filming location.”

Ji-heon narrowed his eyes as he looked at Young-gwang and then signed the document.

“No matter how well Lee Jeong-o does her job, the difference in rank from Team Leader Seong Mi-ran means that clients who entrusted us may feel disappointed.”

“But there’s no one as suitable as Lee Jeong-o…”

“I will go as well. That will balance things out.”

“…What?”

“I will go separately on Sunday, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

Ji-heon replied in a nonchalant tone and handed over the documents.

Ch51 - Nice to See You Again

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Friday evening.

“Mommy! Have a good trip! Bring back lots of gifts!”

Ye-na waved goodbye to her mother, who was leaving for a business trip. She had been crying the whole time Jeong-o was packing, but her spirits lifted with her grandmother’s promise to buy her a bubble toy.

“Don’t worry about the kids. Just work hard. Be careful with your food!”

Guk-soon, letting her daughter go, also made sure to give her advice.

“Yes. You take care too, Mom. Our princess should listen to Grandma!”

Jeong-o also cheerfully said goodbye as she stepped out the door.

During the few days Mi-ran was hospitalized, Jeong-o was incredibly busy.

As Mi-ran’s substitute, she shuffled between the hospital, coordinating with Mi-ran, keeping track of the filming schedule with Deputy Park Young-gwang, and making sure that work continued smoothly in her absence.

She couldn’t relax for even a moment. She had to do her best to ensure the quality of the production didn’t drop due to Mi-ran’s absence. Jeong-o even skimmed through extensive materials on the plane.

After a long journey of 15 hours, including layover time, Jeong-o arrived in Melbourne, Australia. It was now Saturday afternoon at 2 PM, having passed through a day of flying.

Without even unpacking at the accommodation, Jeong-o headed to the city of Melbourne as guided by the location manager. On Saturday, they would check all the filming locations in advance, with shooting scheduled from Sunday to early Tuesday morning.

It was the ground she hadn't set foot on in seven years. Jeong-o sighed as she looked up at the buildings in the city from the car. Very little had changed since seven years ago. It felt as if she had returned to the past.

The fact that the buildings and stores remained in the same place offered Jeong-o a poignant sense of comfort.

The location manager asked, "You said you lived in Melbourne before, right?"

"Yes, for a few months seven years ago."

"Well, since almost none of the buildings have changed, it must bring back memories for you."

"It really does. I've changed, but this place remains the same."

Jeong-o absorbed the sights of Melbourne with her eyes and heart.

Saturday passed in a rush, and Sunday arrived. The preparations started early in the morning, with filming beginning at 9 AM. The shoot took place in a rented building on the beach, but controlling the surrounding area was quite challenging.

While filming was in full swing, Deputy Park Young-gwang asked with concern, "What should we have for lunch? Director Jeong Ji-heon is coming soon."

Hearing Ji-heon's name made Jeong-o tense up.

She had learned around Wednesday that Ji-heon would be joining the filming team. It was an inefficient trip, with flights and accommodations all covered out of pocket.

It was reportedly a choice made solely to please the advertiser, and, of course, the executives from SoRi Telecom were quite pleased with it.

That might be good for them, but the staff at Max Planning found it somewhat uncomfortable. And among them, she was probably the most uncomfortable.

Although she was filled with complaints inside, Jeong-o kept her feelings to herself and started searching the internet.

“I remember the advertiser casually mentioned wanting to eat local food. I wonder if there are any restaurants open. Do you have any recommendations?”

“Just a moment.”

Checking the map, Jeong-o brightened up. A restaurant she had liked was still there.

“Oh! This restaurant is still here!”

“Where?”

Jeong-o showed the restaurant’s photo to Deputy Park Young-gwang and the planning team leader as she explained.

“‘The Crown’ is a restaurant I really loved. They have a lot of dishes, it’s delicious, it’s close to here, and they’re open on Sundays. Their meat pie is just amazing…”

Oh my God!

Jeong-o’s words suddenly cut off.

That restaurant had one wall completely filled with photos of customers.

I took Jeong Ji-heon there. And the owner took a picture of us…

There might be a photo of me and Ji-heon hanging somewhere on that wall…

“If it’s that amazing, we have to go. It really looks great, this assistant,” Young-gwang said, already smitten by the idea after seeing the photo.

Jeong-o stood up from her seat.

“Deputy, can I step out for a moment? It’ll only take about an hour, or maybe 40 minutes.”

“Huh? Is something up?”

“Yes. I’ll also make a reservation for the restaurant on my way.”

“Okay, that sounds good.”

Jeong-o quickly left the building and dashed off. The way to the restaurant was still fresh in her memory. On the way, she even bought a hat and pulled it down low over her face.

The Crown.

The restaurant looked exactly the same as it had seven years ago, from the sign to the interior decor. While the nostalgic scenery touched her heart, there was no time for sentimentality. Jeong-o positioned herself in a corner by the wall with the photos and ordered a drink.

Since it wasn’t lunchtime yet, the restaurant was quiet. Jeong-o quickly scanned the wall for photos while trying to be discreet.

Oh my! There’s a photo!

It was easy to spot, as it was located just slightly below her eye level.

Seizing a moment when no one was watching, Jeong-o pulled the photo off the wall. Just then, her drink was brought to her. She gulped it down and left the restaurant after successfully making a reservation.

Phew!

Her heart raced with a mix of urgency and guilt. Jeong-o took out the photo she had tucked into her pocket and sighed heavily.

How on earth did this relic survive until now?

It was a picture of 26-year-old short-haired Ji-heon and 23-year-old long-haired Jeong-o.

Their faces were stretched into comfortable smiles that somehow resembled siblings.

What on earth were we so happy about back then that we smiled so beautifully?

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After wrapping up her schedule in Korea, Ji-heon boarded a Saturday night flight and arrived in Melbourne on Sunday morning.

According to his passport, he had traveled to Australia seven years ago right after his military discharge. It seemed that Melbourne had been his last stop, as he had stayed at a hotel there for three days, but after that, he had no traces left for about three weeks.

He had spent money and time traveling, but with no memories, it was a place he had nothing to recall.

Yet, there was a strange sense of familiarity in every corner of Melbourne, which made his eyes misty.

After unpacking at the hotel, Ji-heon immediately contacted the planning team leader.

[Yes, Director.] “Team leader, I’m out by the beach, but I can’t see the building.”

[Lee Jeong-o just stepped out.] Before the team leader could finish, a woman appeared, fluttering toward him like a butterfly.

It was almost time for Jeong-o to arrive.

In the middle of the day. In the midst of the sun.

There was Jeong-o, somehow standing out in the chilly landscape.

As she bounced closer, she noticed Ji-heon and cautiously slowed her steps, almost as if she were conscious of him.

She approached very slowly, with no trace of warmth, and greeted him with a formal expression.

“Director, you’ve arrived.”

Have all the things between us turned into nothing?

Was a single kiss not enough? Is my existence to you worth so little?

There shouldn’t have been anyone watching, yet her stiff demeanor drew a similar response from Ji-heon.

“Yes.”

“The clients are over there. Let’s go.”

Jeong-o turned around and led the way.

Would she reach out and grab his wrist at any moment? Would she suddenly kiss him like before? She felt tense and shrank back.

He had an indescribable aura. Like iron filings aligning themselves around a magnet, he seemed to have a charisma that could arrange everything around him to his will.

In layman’s terms, he was a “powerful guy.”

That’s why she couldn’t stand too close to him. As they walked down the street with some distance between them, she asked him, “Have you eaten?”

“Say you did. Say you did. Say you did,” Jeong-o murmured to herself.

“I haven’t eaten yet.”

“We’re planning to go to a local food restaurant. Is that alright?”

Say no. Say no. Say no.

“Yes. Whatever works.”

Phew.

In the end, it seemed they were indeed going to that restaurant.

Jeong-o deeply regretted recommending the restaurant to Deputy Park an hour earlier.

Ji-heon greeted the clients and checked the site.

Just as it was lunchtime, they left the production company director in charge of the site and headed to the restaurant with the clients, the planning team leader, Deputy Park Young-gwang, and Ji-heon.

Jeong-o’s heart raced all the way to the restaurant. Standing right in front of it made her mind go blank.

“Ahhhhh…”

Jeong-o clutched her stomach and groaned.

“I suddenly have a stomachache. I think I need to go to the restroom. You all go ahead and enjoy your meal without worrying about me.”

Her clumsy act of groaning made Ji-heon frown, but Jeong-o casually spoke to the planning team leader and slowly began to step back.

“I made the reservation under the team leader’s name. So, please take care of it…”

After Jeong-o made her escape, Young-gwang let out a worried sigh.

“How unfortunate to recommend a good restaurant and not be able to eat there.”

“Is this the restaurant the assistant recommended?” Ji-heon asked.

“Yes, Director. It’s a restaurant that Lee Jeong-o visited during her working holiday.”

Ji-heon quietly nodded and continued walking. He was displeased that she kept avoiding him.

The restaurant was now quite crowded. When the planning team leader told the owner their name, the owner led them to an empty table. Ji-heon entered the restaurant last.

“Hmm?”

Suddenly, the restaurant owner recognized Ji-heon and his eyes widened.

Ji-heon kept his lips tightly pressed together as he looked at the owner. The owner’s face lit up, and he smiled broadly as he took Ji-heon’s hand in a friendly manner.

“It’s nice to see you again!”

“You know me?” Ji-heon asked in English.

“You came to our restaurant a few years ago. Don’t you remember?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t recall.”

The fact that the owner remembered his visit years ago didn’t give Ji-heon much trust, and he smiled bitterly.

“Oh dear, I even know your name. Mr. Jeong. My memory is the best in this town.”

The owner continued, feeling pity for Ji-heon, who couldn’t remember him.

Hearing “Mr. Jeong” made Ji-heon look at the owner again. The owner pointed to the wall covered in photos.

“I took a picture of you and put it up here, and the customers went wild. How’s your girlfriend?”

“…My girlfriend?”

“The person you took the picture with—wasn’t she your girlfriend? Did you break up?”

“There was someone I took a picture with?” Ji-heon asked, confused.

“Wait a moment. Let me see.”

The owner’s eyes sparkled as he scanned the wall. But soon, he tilted his head in confusion.

Pointing to the exact spot where Jeong-o had taken the photo, the owner said to his staff, “Huh? I could have sworn the photo was right here until recently. Where did it go? Did it disappear while cleaning?”

Of course. Ji-heon nodded with an indifferent expression.

“Oh dear. I’m sorry.”

Despite apologizing, the owner didn’t give up and continued to inspect the photos on the wall. And then…

“Oh! Here it is!”

He finally shouted again.

Ch52 - Come Prepared

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The owner of the restaurant “The Crown” approached Ji-heon, holding a photo he had taken from the wall.

“Do you see this? This person here is you. And the person next to you is the woman you brought. Do you remember?”

Ji-heon frowned and stared closely at the photo.

The photo the owner showed was a picture within a picture. In other words, it was another photo taken against the backdrop of Ji-heon’s photo.

“Oh! It really looks like you, Director! This is amazing!” Deputy Park Young-gwang exclaimed after checking the photo.

Ji-heon’s face was small enough to barely recognize. It was a picture of him shortly after he had left the military, with short hair and a slight smile. He was with an unfamiliar woman.

While Ji-heon’s face was distinct, the woman’s face was a bit further away and out of focus, making it blurry.

His heart raced, and his head throbbed.

The only identifiable details about the woman were a sky-blue T-shirt with a character on it and her long hair.

Ji-heon asked the owner for permission and saved the image of the photo to his phone.

Even after seeing it with his own eyes, he couldn’t believe it.

Did I really have a girlfriend?

Or perhaps he didn’t want to believe it.

Was his body resisting the retrieval of those memories? Now that he had come to care for Lee Jeong-o?

In the midst of this, he thought of Jeong-o.

Seeing her made his heart ache painfully. It seemed to have started after he learned that she had a child.

You have a child, and I had a girlfriend. Does that make our situations a bit similar? Is there no need for me to resent you anymore?

There was no longer any reason to delay the inevitable.

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In the end, Jeong-o couldn’t enter the restaurant and had to eat alone.

“It would have been more fun if the assistant had come along. We found a trace of our director there. He had taken a photo at that restaurant seven years ago. The owner remembered it. But the photo is gone now,” Young-gwang shared his thoughts after returning from the restaurant.

Jeong-o was surprised and asked, “The owner remembers? From seven years ago?”

“Yes. Mr. Jeong. He even remembered your name. Apparently, the director was so handsome that people loved the photo when it was displayed. Our director’s looks are internationally recognized.”

“……”

“But the director has no recollection, right? He must have amnesia or something. So he doesn’t remember anything at all. It’s quite unfortunate.”

Jeong-o let out a quiet sigh, imagining what might have happened if he had entered the restaurant with Ji-heon. Just thinking about it sent a chill down his spine.

Over Young-gwang's shoulder, he caught a glimpse of Ji-heon. Jeong-o quickly turned his head; it was time to focus on work again.

The advertisement was set around a storyline where the protagonist model comes to Australia on a working holiday and works as a server and a dishwasher at a restaurant. It was a story developed from ideas gained from Jeong-o's own experiences.

Seven years ago, during his working holiday in Melbourne, Jeong-o worked as a hotel cleaner. He had flown across the ocean with dreams of earning money and studying English but found himself in a situation where he hardly met anyone.

Moreover, the pay was not much, so he always struggled to make ends meet. He couldn't even think about going out on weekends, and he found it difficult to join gatherings that required participation fees.

Then one day, a week came crashing down like a string of unfortunate events. His landlord raised the rent, forcing him to spend all his saved money on rent while waiting for the next paycheck.

On the second day of going hungry because his house was completely out of food, Jeong-o, with no shame, borrowed $10 from a friend he worked with. He was on his way to the Korean mart when he bumped into someone at a crosswalk.

Though the impact hurt, he shook it off quickly, thinking he needed to buy something to eat at the mart. However, when he reached the mart and checked his pockets, he realized he had no money.

He thought he must have dropped the $10 somewhere and retraced his steps, but he couldn't find the bill anywhere. The sorrow from that moment was unbearable.

Just as he began to sob over his misfortunes, someone called out to him from behind.

“Excuse me. Are you Korean?”

“……”

“I’m the person you bumped into earlier. I was just checking to see if you were hurt.”

The person was Ji-heon.

He had come chasing after Jeong-o, thinking he was crying from the pain of the bump.

Forgetful of his pride, Jeong-o cried even louder.

Hearing a familiar Korean voice in a land full of English, combined with the sorrow of his hunger, made the tears flow freely. That was the first meeting with Ji-heon.

‘He had such a baby-like image back then.’

Jeong-o remembered Ji-heon from seven years ago, still holding a bit of boyish charm. Now that he thought about it, that younger Ji-heon bore a slight resemblance to Ye-na.

Especially when he would casually lower his eyelids. Sometimes Ye-na would give a haughty expression, as if she understood the world, and in those moments, she seemed to inherit Ji-heon’s personality as well, which was amusing.

I hope that if she resembles her father, it’ll be the 7-years-ago version of him.

Back then, he was very kind and had an exceptional consideration for others. He wasn’t very talkative but knew how to make people laugh quietly. That’s why it didn’t take long for Jeong-o to develop feelings for Ji-heon.

As various thoughts tangled in his mind, his phone vibrated. Startled, he checked the screen. It was a call from Guk-soon. Jeong-o stepped away from the shooting set for a moment and answered the phone.

“Hello, Mom!”

As soon as Jeong-o picked up, he heard the voice of a cute little girl. A smile spread across his face as he welcomed the call.

“Princess Ye-na!”

“Mom, did you buy a gift?”

“What do you want?”

[“Kangaroo!”]
“How can I bring a kangaroo?”

[“No, a kangaroo doll! Mom, I like kangaroos.”]
“Why do you like kangaroos?”

[“Their pockets are really big. Mom kangaroos carry their babies in there.”]
Ye-na continued with confidence.

[“I want to be a kangaroo too and get into your pocket!”]
Ah, my little princess, how I want to bite you!

I want to! I want to! I want to put you in my pocket and carry you around!

Jeong-o barely suppressed his urge to rush to Seoul and said goodbye.

“Okay, my girl, listen to Grandma and have a good day at kindergarten, okay? I’ll come on Tuesday evening, got it?”

[“Yes! Hurry and come!”]
With a pleasant smile, he was about to put his phone back into his pocket when something caught in the fabric.

It was the photo he had put in his pocket earlier that day.

Jeong-o took it out and looked at it again.

Seeing Ji-heon's expression today made the smile from seven years ago feel even more distant. Guilt resurfaced. This memory felt like it belonged not to them but to the restaurant.

'Should I secretly put it back again?'

Surely that person would not return to the restaurant.

Jeong-o decided to take the chance and quickly run to the restaurant since he was already outside.

Being on the opposite side of the globe made him feel the seasonal difference. It was summer in Korea, but winter in Australia. Although the date said it was winter, the weather felt more like a cool autumn day. Still, it was quite cold in the mornings and evenings, making Jeong-o shiver.

When I'm living through a long winter, are you wandering somewhere in the depths of summer?

Thinking about that made him sad.

Both his body and heart felt cold, causing him to walk faster. However, when he reached the crosswalk, Jeong-o found himself unable to take another step.

Why am I even here?!

"Ugh…"

Why did things never go his way?

Just as he recognized Ji-heon in front of him, he immediately turned around.

As she was about to leave without saying a word, Ji-heon called out from behind him.

“Are you planning to keep avoiding me?”

Jeong-o’s feet came to a halt again.

“How long are you going to keep avoiding me?”

Like iron filings realigning themselves by the magnet that was Ji-heon, his body felt frozen and he felt insignificant for not being able to move.

Before he knew it, he had walked up to her.

“Whatever happened to the confidence you had when you called me your man?”

He asked with a casual lowering of his eyelids. It was unclear if he was teasing or genuinely curious about where that confidence had gone.

“Lee Jeong-o, don’t you think you owe me an apology?”

“For what?”

“You said you live with your mother.”

His voice grew sharper.

He was reproaching her for her lie. Jeong-o felt an overwhelming urge to shout.

Do you think I wanted to hide Ye-na’s existence so desperately?

But no sound came out, only tears.

This was the place.

This was the crosswalk where we first met, you fool.

“Why are you crying?”

Ji-heon, unaware of everything, scolded him.

She hated Jeong-o.

She hated him even more for not showing up during lunch.

She resented him for not being honest with her, for hiding the fact that their teammate Song Gi-hoon already knew.

Yet, at the same time, she was constantly searching for reasons. She tried to convince herself that there must have been a reason why he hadn't told her the truth.

Perhaps it was a desire to be seen in a better light without any barriers. If that were the case, it would make sense.

But his heart had already crossed an irretrievable river.

Seeing that she looked scared, despite her anger, his voice softened.

"I'm the one who got hurt, so why are you crying?"

"I can cry if I want. What's wrong with me crying in my own eyes?"

"Then why are you crying? Are you sorry for lying to me?"

"No! It's because you're acting just like my cold ex-boyfriend."

"Do you want to talk about that jerk?"

He tried to hold back his anger, but her provocation made his emotions flare up.

"Do you not realize how terrible your behavior is right now?"

"……."

"Thinking about your ex-boyfriend while acting this way in front of me. You should go to him."

Seeing her like this made him feel foolish, angry, and saddened.

Yet, despite it all, he couldn’t let go of his feelings.

The fear of what would happen if she really left for that guy made the next words tumble out of his mouth.

“Hiding a child means you wanted to look good for me, right? And now that it’s all out, you want to talk about your ex to provoke me?”

“…….”

“Is your goal to completely wreck me? What do you want, exactly?”

“…….”

“You must have wanted something from me, which is why you played along. You even accepted all those kisses.”

In that moment, she opened her eyes wide as if trying to say something and then began to pout her lips. It was a look of longing, like a mermaid who had lost her voice.

One thing was clear.

He realized that she was also suppressing her feelings intensely.

It might be because of the child, or perhaps fear of what others in the company would think.

“I won’t forgive you for talking about that jerk. Don’t even think about it.”

In that case, he had no choice but to take a step further.

“If you want to start over, don’t look back. Don’t hold on to the past; just think of it as if your memory has been completely wiped, like mine. You’ll find it surprisingly easier that way.”

Honestly, he would have thought this way even if she didn’t move.

“Cookies are only meant to be stored in a cookie jar, right? The same goes for you. When you come to me, don’t bring someone else along.”

He could no longer ignore the time they had spent together.

The reason he had come here after an almost 11-hour flight was the same.

To see you. To have you.

To keep holding onto you as you kept trying to slip away from me.

Have I ever wanted to be part of someone’s life this desperately?

Ji-heon took the hotel room key card from his pocket and pressed it into her hand.

“When you come, come prepared. Don’t think you can have a fun night and then just disappear.”

“…….”

“Once I grab hold of you.”

“…….”

“I won’t let go.”

Ch53 - If There Were a Camera Reflecting Our Lives

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On Monday morning, Eun-bi cheerfully greeted Team Leader Seong Mi-ran, who had returned to work after a long absence.

“Team Leader, are you feeling alright? I was really worried about you.”

“Yes, thank you for your concern. I’m all better now.”

“Since you had surgery, it’s a shame that all your hard work has gone to Lee Jeong-oh.”

“No, it’s a relief, really. Lee Jeong-oh did the presentation.”

“But filming is different. It’s not domestic filming; it’s overseas. With clients coming along, your rank really falls behind. You must be quite worried.”

As Eun-bi continued to chat with Mi-ran, Deputy Ko Eun-joo chimed in.

“So, Director Jeong Ji-heon joined us yesterday.”

Eun-bi’s eyes widened at the shocking news.

“Did Manager Choi not tell you that the director is on a business trip? Oh, I guess she didn’t.”

Ko Eun-joo observed Eun-bi’s expression and smirked slightly.

A tremor of annoyance ran through Eun-bi’s lips.

‘Ji-heon is on a business trip? Following Lee Jeong-oh?’

Before she knew it, news of Eun-bi and Ji-heon’s breakup had spread throughout the office, and colleagues were reluctant to bring up Ji-heon in front of her.

Eun-bi also had no real connection with Ji-heon anymore, so she didn’t know what he had been up to, which is why she only heard about his business trip long after it happened.

“It’s a relief that the director is going too. The clients must feel reassured.”

Eun-bi responded with a strange mix of laughter and anger and walked away from them.

Watching Eun-bi’s back, Ko Eun-joo snickered, while Mi-ran awkwardly grabbed Eun-joo’s arm.

“Come on, they just broke up recently; Eun-joo, you’re being too harsh.”

“Team Leader.”

But in Princess Mama’s dictionary, there’s no such thing as reflection or regret.

“I’m as sharp as a knife.”

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Eun-yeop received a call from Eun-bi after arriving at work. Eun-bi suddenly exploded with anger.

[Oppa, are you even thinking about how to separate Lee Jeong-oh from Jeong Ji-heon?]
Eun-yeop’s expression soured at his sister’s irritability. For some time now, he hadn’t been pleased with how much his younger sister had been climbing over him.

[Jeong-oh is on a business trip with Ji-heon! Are you just going to sit there and do nothing?]
Eun-yeop wasn’t even aware that Ji-heon had gone on a business trip with Jeong-oh.

Before Eun-yeop could respond, Eun-bi continued.

[That girl is a mother! A single mother! And she’s currently flirting with Ji-heon!]
Now, Eun-bi was truly throwing a tantrum.

Eun-yeop was also aware of this fact. Over the past few days, he had been researching Lee Jeong-oh.

Lee Jeong-oh, 30 years old. Copywriter. A single mother with a young daughter.

The child was seven years old. Ji-heon had lost his memory seven years ago as well.

The thought of this made Eun-yeop uneasy. He began to wonder if Lee Ye-na could be Ji-heon’s biological daughter.

If that were true, did Ji-heon already know?

It was hard to infer anything from someone so enigmatic.

What if he still didn’t know the truth?

Even so, if it were the truth, he would find out soon enough.

“Chae Eun-bi, don’t act rashly. Got it?”

Eun-yeop warned, fully aware of his sister’s impulsive nature.

“You just stay out of it.”

Eun-yeop sternly advised and then hung up the phone.

The fact that the two of them were on a business trip together was troubling.

As they grew closer, Ji-heon would inevitably get closer to the truth.

‘So, what can I do?’

He contemplated various possibilities.

Creating distrust between Ji-heon and Lee Jeong-oh.

Damaging the past between Ji-heon and Lee Jeong-oh.

Threatening Jeong-oh. Threatening Jeong-oh’s family.

Expelling Jeong-oh from Ji-heon’s household and taking the child away.

Eliminating the child, or eliminating Jeong-oh.

He decided that various actions needed to occur simultaneously without a specific order.

In the end, Ji-heon had to choose not Lee Jeong-oh, but Ms. Jang Young-mi.

How much did Ms. Jang know about Jeong-oh? Did she know that Jeong-oh had a child?

It was crucial to find out right away.

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Filming in downtown Melbourne.

Despite having obtained prior cooperation and permission from the city hall, unexpected problems often arise on set.

A traffic accident occurred in front of Flinders Street Station, a famous landmark in Melbourne. This happened just as the filming crew arrived and began setting up their equipment.

While there were no injuries, the minor accident took a considerable amount of time to clear, forcing the filming crew to wait idly.

Jeong-oh asked the police officers who arrived on the scene when things would be cleared up and sought their cooperation. Initially annoyed by the filming crew, the police officers became more amiable after hearing Jeong-oh's Australian-accented English.

Ji-heon, who arrived late to the scene after having lunch with the clients, quietly watched Jeong-oh bustling around with her sleeves rolled up.

The previous afternoon, Ji-heon had returned to the restaurant called "The Crown" to look at the photos on the walls and chat with the owner. However, he couldn't find any other clues related to his past there.

Seven years had passed. Ji-heon left a message with the restaurant owner to contact him if he learned anything about the woman who had taken a photo with him.

Unable to know anything about the past, he shifted his thoughts back to the present. He couldn't shake off Jeong-oh's cold attitude. In the midst of this, he had encountered her in front of a crosswalk. Once again, she tried to run away as soon as she spotted him.

Always just out of reach, never grasped. She had always been like this.

He wanted to yell in anger and question her for various reasons, but faced with her in front of him, he couldn't get past the urge to plead, "Please just see me." With that feeling, he handed her the card key to his accommodation.

But she hadn't come the night before.

The filming wrapped up at 11, and he knew she had returned to her room afterward. However, she hadn't even contacted him or given any sign of her presence.

As the night of waiting passed, seeing her appear on set the next morning with a bright, sunny face made him feel a bit frustrated.

It made him feel like he was nothing at all.

I felt like I held little value to her.

Even now, I wanted to chase after her and ask why she hadn’t come last night, but Ji-heon restrained the impulse.

Would she come tonight?

And if she didn’t come again?

Should I just accept the outcome and give up?

Though it seemed inevitable, accepting it was far from easy.

She blended in perfectly with the language and geography of this place. Looking at her felt like gazing at a dazzling landscape out the window—scenery that could never truly be mine.

Yet, the fact that he, too, had once stayed in this place where she had spent her student years brought some small comfort.

Lee Jeong-oh. If there had been a camera reflecting our lives, perhaps…

Perhaps there might have been a moment when we were captured in the same frame.

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At the Go academy.

Yena, who always had sparkling eyes in front of the Go board, sat today with an unusual gloom.

“Yena, do you want to come to my house today? My mom’s baking bread.”

Doh-bin spoke to Yena, noticing her downcast expression.

Hearing “mom,” Yena shrugged her shoulders, then answered sullenly.

“No.”

“Why not?”

Yena’s lips pouted, and her face turned as if she were about to cry.

“…Mom went on a business trip and didn’t come back. She didn’t even call me today.”

“She’s just busy. My dad doesn’t answer calls when he’s on a trip either.”

Doh-bin tried to soothe her by speaking up for Jeong-oh, but Yena’s voice grew louder.

“Still, she should call me in the morning! She should say goodbye before I go to daycare!”

Yena had never been separated from her mom for this long before.

Sometimes her mom was working late and she’d fall asleep without seeing her, but she was always there in the morning.

Even when she’d visit her grandmother in Gunsan, she’d see her mom the next morning. When she’d cry because she missed her mom, her mom would even drive all the way to Gunsan early the next morning to see her.

But now, her mom was so far away.

“I’m scared that Mom won’t come back.”

In the end, Yena burst into tears.

There had been times when things she longed for desperately didn’t come true.

“Oh dear, why is our Yena crying?”

The teacher rushed over and hugged Yena tightly, but Yena couldn’t stop crying.

Just then, Doh-bin’s mother, Jin-seo, entered the academy.

“Mom!”

Doh-bin ran to her urgently, tugging at her clothes.

“Mom, Yena’s crying. Hurry up and come here!”

With a serious expression, Doh-bin asked his mother for help, and Jin-seo was startled to see Yena in tears.

“Yena, what’s wrong?”

“Mom went to Australia for work, and she didn’t call me this morning.”

Yena replied between sobs.

“Oh, I see. Maybe she was too busy. Should I try calling her for you?”

Yena nodded eagerly at Jin-seo’s suggestion.

Jin-seo immediately called Jeong-oh, hoping she would be available to answer.

The long dial tone finally stopped.

Yena took the phone from Jin-seo and heard her mom’s voice on the other end.

[Yes, Doh-bin’s mother!]

“Moooom!”

Yena’s crying grew louder. Hearing Yena’s voice, Jeong-oh asked in surprise what was wrong.

[Yena! What’s going on!]

“Why didn’t you call me? Yena was so worried!”

Yena clutched the phone and cried her heart out.

It took a while for Yena to calm down. Even after the call ended, she remained quiet, as if still feeling something was missing.

In the car on the way to Guksun’s restaurant, Doh-bin comforted Yena.

“Yena, I’m going to go to the Go academy with you forever.”

“…”

“I’ll always stay by your side.”

Jin-seo, sitting in the driver’s seat, smiled quietly at her son’s innocent confession of first love.

Even though he seemed to have forgotten his mom while gazing at his first love, she felt proud that she could support her son’s affections.

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After finally calming Yena down, Jeong-oh called Jin-seo again to thank her for her concern and help.

She couldn’t call Guksun earlier in the morning while preparing for the shoot. Later, a call came from Guksun, but she hadn’t been able to answer it. She thought she’d call in time for Yena’s return home, but it seemed the waiting had been torture for her child.

Her heart dropped at these unexpected turns. The same went for what had happened the night before.

While turning her head to scan the filming location, Jeong-oh looked at Ji-heon. He was talking to the client in the back. Their eyes met for a moment, but he quickly averted his gaze, focusing on the client instead.

Moments like this made last night seem like a lie. The keycard he'd firmly placed in her hand was still in her coat pocket.

Receiving Yena's call made her even more anxious.

I need to reach you quickly.

Our child keeps growing up.

I need to make you realize what you're missing out on, and soon.

But the fear of losing my child if I move recklessly held her back, making her hesitate.

"If only I could somehow sneak a look at his phone…."

She knew it was wrong, but snooping through Ji-heon's phone was the quickest way for her to learn about his mother.

But to look at his phone, she'd have to get close to him.

That thought made it all the more difficult to make up her mind.

Inside her, the determination to move toward her goal battled constantly with the guilt of deceiving him again.

"Thanks to you, Lee Daeri, the shoot is going well. We won't have to work until dawn tonight. We should wrap up around 10 p.m. You'll be able to catch your flight with ease tomorrow," said Chief Park Young-gwang, sharing the schedule. They'd have free time from 10 p.m. until dawn. Though the morning flight left little time to spare.

What should I do with that time?

While she pondered, the sun setting between buildings cast the city in a reddish glow before bidding farewell.

It was their last night in Melbourne. Before long, the model had finished her final shoot, and the client had left after their goodbyes. Ji-heon, too, seemed to have departed with the client, as he was nowhere to be seen.

Jeong-oh finished tidying up the set and returned to the hotel. She dropped her belongings off in her room, then headed back out, lingering in the lobby, hesitating several times.

Should she leave the keycard at the desk, as it would be difficult to return it to him directly?

While pacing around the lobby, the client called out to her.

“Oh, Lee Daeri, you’re here. Were you waiting for someone?”

“Oh, no. I just took a quick walk around the city.”

She barely managed to find an excuse, and the client nodded and thanked her.

“Okay, then. Rest well, and thank you for your hard work.”

Jeong-oh politely said goodbye to the client. After he left, she let out a long sigh.

In the end, she couldn’t leave the keycard at the desk and returned to her room.

She showered, dried her hair, changed clothes.

Jeong-oh looked at herself in the mirror.

The young and fresh twenty-three-year-old Lee Jeong-oh had now turned thirty.

Busy taking care of her child and working hard, she hadn’t put much effort into her appearance. She wasn’t sure if she was as pretty as she’d been back then.

But if he still wanted her, did that mean he still thought she was beautiful?

Her heart raced at the thought, just as it had all those years ago.

She took only the keycard and left the room.

His room was on the fifth floor. Hers was on the fourth. She nervously made her way up to his door, fearing she’d run into other colleagues or the client.

She anxiously walked until she was standing before his door.

If I open this door, something will change.

Should I ring the doorbell?

She wanted to, but she worried the sound would be too loud.

Is that why he gave me the keycard? So I’d open it and let myself in?

“No, I can’t do that.”

He could be talking to the client in his room.

If she unlocked the door and walked in, she might end up in a very awkward situation.

Right, I’ll knock.

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If there’s no response, if he’s not there, I’ll leave the keycard at the desk and go back to my room.

Jeong-oh steadied herself, then knocked on the door.

Knock knock.

The sound wasn’t nearly as bold as she felt. It was a timid attempt.

But the door opened.

Had I been waiting for this moment?

“Director….”

Before she could call him, she found herself pulled inside as he reached out and caught her in his arms.

Ch54 - Wanting It All

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Eunyeop visited Madame Jang Yeongmi's mansion on his way home from work. With Jiheon currently on an overseas business trip, now was the perfect opportunity.

He claimed he was there to offer advice on Yeongmi's private real estate disputes, but his true intentions lay elsewhere.

Yeongmi, too, had something she wanted to confirm with Eunyeop. After hesitating a few times, she finally asked, almost as if she couldn't believe it.

"Jiheon suddenly told me that he and Eunbi broke up… Is it true?"

Eunyeop responded as if it were nothing significant.

"Did Jiheon say that? To be honest, they've broken up and gotten back together so often that I'm not really sure myself."

"Oh, is that so? I didn't know that."

"Even when she and Jiheon were separated, Eunbi kept calling you, didn't she?"

"Oh dear, where else would you find such a devoted girl?"

Yeongmi sighed, and Eunyeop gave a faint smile.

"She's such a kind girl, but Jiheon… I just don't understand his whims."

“Madame, I have something to ask you.”

Seeing her in this moment, Eunyeop carefully broached the topic. It was the perfect timing.

“Did Jiheon have a girlfriend seven years ago?”

Yeongmi’s eyes widened at Eunyeop’s question. After a moment, she avoided his gaze, feigning ignorance.

“A girlfriend? You know Jiheon… he never—”

“You can tell me. It’s okay.”

Eunyeop pressed her again, making it harder for Yeongmi to deny it.

“Well, it was nothing, really. I wouldn’t even call her a girlfriend. There was just this strange girl who followed him around, but I made sure she understood, and she stopped contacting him. They cut ties seven years ago. Jiheon’s done nothing wrong.”

Inside, Eunyeop felt a wave of relief.

As I thought, she knows nothing.

It was clear that Yeongmi was unaware of how Lee Jeong-oh was doing these days. After having her son Seongwoo cut ties with Jeong-oh seven years ago, she believed the matter had been entirely resolved.

In that case, this might be easier to handle.

“I understand that it was probably just a casual thing back then. After all, Jiheon was… like that back then.”

Eunyeop continued, speaking as if he understood and sympathized with her.

“But even though you want to protect Jiheon, Madame… Jiheon, as I see him as a friend, is a bit different.”

“…”

“Thanks to his memory loss, Jiheon’s surroundings were reset once. But his nature remains. You remember the rumors from four years ago, right? All those women Jiheon supposedly got involved with, or was rumored to have gotten involved with. It was truly awful. And because he seemed so troubled by his lost memories, no one could step in.”

“…”

“Eunbi is the only one who managed to hold him down.”

It was all too easy to manipulate the narrative of someone’s personal life. The mother and son in this household seemed close, yet they knew nothing about each other.

Eunyeop would shatter the trust between them, ensuring both would fall under his control.

“Only Eunbi can keep Jiheon steady, Madame.”

He firmly reminded Yeongmi.

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Seunggyu received the results of his investigation on Lee Jeong-oh by email. His hands trembled as he realized he’d done something he wasn’t proud of.

Lee Jeong-oh. Age 30.

Her age, address, education, occupation, family.

A few sheets of paper held the life story of a woman who had worked diligently all her life.

If anything stood out, it was that both her mother and she were single mothers. But there was no information on any past relationships or the identity of her child’s father.

Outside of her home, her mother’s shop, and her workplace, Lee Jeong-oh hardly went anywhere else. Recently, she had only been frequenting the hospital to visit her supervisor, Team Leader Sung Mi-ran, who had undergone surgery.

It was an almost mind-numbingly uneventful report.

But as Seunggyu casually flipped through the pages, he paused when he reached the photo of her child.

Rubbing his eyes, he looked closely at the photo again, then turned back to confirm the child’s name.

Daughter: Lee Yena. Seven years old.

“That Yena… is Lee Yena?”

Seunggyu’s mouth dropped open.

My son Dobin’s first crush, Yena, is Assistant Manager Lee Jeong-oh’s daughter?

Leaning back in his chair, Seunggyu let out a long sigh.

“Ugh, why is everything so tangled…?”

Could it be that Lee Jeong-oh approached Jung Jiheon deliberately, using Yena as a means to get close?

And could my wife have been caught up in this scheme as well?

A vague unease settled over him. Seunggyu, who cared deeply about his friend, was filled with worry.

How was he supposed to break this news to his dear friend?

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An hour earlier, Jiheon had seen Jeong-oh lingering at the front desk on the hotel's first floor. He could guess what she was hesitating about.

Inside, he was torn, wishing she would just leave the lobby, but he restrained himself from intervening. He returned quietly to his room, making sure she wouldn't notice him, and waited.

He wanted her to make the final decision herself.

And after a seemingly endless wait, he finally heard a knock.

Despite giving her his card key, she knocked, so at first, Jiheon thought it might be someone else. His expression betrayed a flicker of tension, but upon seeing her blushing, he immediately felt his control snap.

"Assistant Manag…"

Before she could finish calling him, he pulled her in, holding her close.

She stumbled from being pulled in so quickly, falling into his arms, where he steadied her and looked down at her.

Her eyes trembled with a sparkle, like she'd brought stars into the room with her. They seemed to carry uncertainty, resignation, and perhaps even longing for what was to come. Jiheon wanted to consume all of it.

Jeong-oh was, in truth, a little scared.

When his warm fingers touched the back of her neck, her shoulders gave a slight shiver. His body radiated a high temperature, like something long preheated, to the point she almost worried. As if checking his warmth, she lifted her hand to his cheek.

It was as if he'd been waiting for this; he quickly leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. In response, her hand slid down from his cheek.

As the heat transferred through their kiss made her heart race harder, his full kiss somehow dispelled her earlier anxieties. His desire, evident in his breath, unraveled all her remaining thoughts.

She reached out, her fingers brushing against the buttons on his neatly pressed blouse. As she took a surprised breath, he seized the opportunity, deepening the embrace. Though they'd been here before, Jeong-oh felt as if she couldn't think of anything at all.

When he finally pulled his lips away, a soft sigh escaped from between her lips. He gazed at her intently, as if savoring the sight, then teased her.

"Did you think we'd just kiss?"

He spoke playfully, his lips gleaming.

Seeing his intense gaze and smile together made him seem all the more insistent and greedy.

She had been warned to brace herself just yesterday, so pretending to be naïve was out of the question. She wasn't some innocent child, either.

And yet, her heart felt full.

Jiheon watched her changing expressions intently. Just watching her was entertaining, but right now, he wanted to see a more unguarded side of her. He knew that seeing it would make him lose even more control.

"What should I do?" he asked leisurely, as if giving her the final choice. He was already captivated by her eyes, which sparkled like they were on the verge of tears.

"You already know."

She pouted as she responded, seeming to blame him for asking when he clearly knew why she was there.

Satisfied enough.

He'd heard everything he needed to.

He didn't want to wait any longer. He wouldn't wait.

As his warm fingers flicked open her buttons, a rough sigh brushed slowly against her cheek.

Her shoulders hunched inward as if embarrassed to reveal herself. He felt a sudden urge to hold both of her arms down, but Jiheon savored this delicate moment.

It seemed like she was adjusting her body to his touch, despite her embarrassment.

Gently, he laid her down on the bed and took his place above her.

But suddenly, she sat up.

He, too, paused, looking down at her.

Her eyes, about to spill tears, stared at his exposed body.

A scar.

Jeong-oh's gaze lingered on the surgical scar from seven years ago. Finally, with a trembling voice, she ran her fingertips over the scar and asked, "Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"The accident… you had one, remember?"

In that moment, in the midst of all this…

Jiheon found it endearing that Jeong-oh was asking about an accident from seven years ago, so he chuckled. Her expression, however, was entirely serious.

"The scar looks deep," she murmured.

"It was; I broke a rib."

"Does it still hurt?"

Had the pain also evaporated with his memories? Though he'd been in the hospital for a long time, Jiheon remembered little of the struggle. Fortunately, his organs hadn't been severely damaged.

He answered lightly, "If it still hurt after all this time, that'd be a problem."

"Your memory hasn't come back, though."

She retorted, as if stubbornly clinging to her point.

Memory. Did memory really matter? When I don't even know what my past was like?

Since visiting *The Crown*, his thoughts on his memory had weighed more heavily on him. The fear that he might confront a past better left unknown was undeniable.

Anyway, wasn't the present more important than the past?

"Do you want me to remember?" he asked.

"Well, yes. It's three years of your life, after all."

Her expression held sincere concern.

The sting in his chest was both comforting and bittersweet. He thought about how he wished to be cared for like this for a long time.

After a moment, she asked quietly, "…How did you live?"

This time, she seemed genuinely serious, almost as if holding back tears. Jiheon wondered if she was just trying to delay what would come next and stared at her. Then she added,

"During those seven years, I mean. Losing your memory… it's like losing part of yourself, isn't it?"

…No one had ever said something like that to him.

He felt his own eyes sting, and he forced the feeling back.

“As I’ve told you, I lived… boringly.”

And he had. Jiheon had little interest in anything before he met her. The time before she came into his life didn’t matter much. This moment, here and now, was the most thrilling time in his life.

In this important moment, as he watched her tenderly linger over old wounds, he felt an overwhelming love for her. At the same time, he was both frustrated and anxious, wondering if she shared the same longing he did. He couldn’t help but voice his complaint.

“Why do you keep touching that spot? There are plenty of other places to touch.”

To reassure her, he added, “It doesn’t hurt at all anymore.”

He wanted to warn her that the way she touched him like that was almost agonizing, driving him to the edge.

But he swallowed back the words.

The moment he suggested touching somewhere else, her fingertips hesitated, as though caught off guard, and then withdrew entirely.

So, when he suggested exploring other places, she simply let go.

In some ways, she was bold, yet in others, she was so cautious that it felt unnecessary. Her every action pulled his gaze toward her.

After a single tease, her eyes had returned to a hesitant, fearful expression.

She had come here fully prepared, and yet he couldn’t understand what she was still so afraid of. He wanted to peek inside her mind.

Since he couldn’t look into her thoughts, he’d explore what was under her clothes with a desperate desire she could never understand.

Jiheon realized that his pride—the one that made him want to possess her yet keep his own heart protected—had been completely shattered.

He wanted every part of her.

Ch55 - I love you too.

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“You seem a bit too drunk.”

The handsome man sitting next to Eunbi looked at her with concern.

Eunbi, who had come to the bar alone and ended up chatting with him, shook her head and waggled a finger.

The bartender, sensing the atmosphere, refilled Eunbi’s glass. She drank it all at once, smiling in satisfaction. The man next to her looked even more worried.

“Stop drinking,” he said.

As she tried to order more from the bartender, the man intervened.

“Who are you to stop me?” Eunbi challenged him with her flushed face.

“You’re going to hurt yourself,” he replied gently. Her fierce glare softened, and a single tear slipped down her cheek—not forced, but one that truly came from her heart.

In that moment, her years of waiting and hoping for Jeong Jiheon wavered because of this man’s simple, caring words. It was shockingly easy to falter.

Had anyone ever truly cared for her well-being?

Before she knew it, Eunbi was crying in front of this man she’d only just met.

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In his steady gaze, Jeong Oh could see his desire to completely possess her.

His intense gaze, focused enough to notice every tiny detail, made her feel shy. The way he just looked at her without a word felt almost like teasing.

Everything she once knew felt distant, like it had been erased. As he blocked her view of the scar beside his defined abs, she didn’t know where else to look.

Her breath quickened, her chest rising and falling.

He shared his breath with hers, as if to steady her. There was a tremor in it. Only then did she realize he was nervous too, which comforted her.

But that comfort was fleeting.

His large hand, resting on her back under her blouse, moved tentatively. As her fingers brushed over his, the restraint between them broke.

She felt herself leaning into him, yet a subtle sadness tinged her heart at his practiced touch. It hurt that she couldn’t express it.

He laid her gently back onto the sheets and let his warmth envelop her. She couldn’t resist. When he pressed her wrists, her waist, her strength slipped away.

Every place his lips touched left a faint red mark on her fair skin. At thirty-three, he knew things he hadn’t at twenty-six. That difference sent shivers through her, bringing tears to her eyes.

With her vision blurred by gentle sensations, she gazed up at him.

He held her close, as if reigning over the air above them, sighing in awe at the sight of her.

After a long wait, he could finally take in the most beautiful woman in the world.

It felt just like the first time they'd met, his eyes stinging, his heart clenching. It was more than simple pleasure; it was the reverence of facing a cherished soul. His heart raced, and his mind was overwhelmed.

Although he knew she wasn't really going to run away, some primal instinct compelled him to hold her tightly, not letting go.

I hope you want me as much as I want you.

"Tell me."

"…"

"If you don't want this, say so."

"Are you ready to accept me?"

The way he looked at her, as though he'd never let her go, seemed almost unfair while asking for permission. Yet Jeong Oh knew that this was his sincere heart.

She reminded herself not to give her heart completely, that one day she might get hurt again. She had a purpose, and she came here for that purpose. Until it was fulfilled, she had to stay clear-headed, keep her emotions steady. But every time he spoke, every breath, every gaze, and gesture made her feel like she was completely ensnared, unable to move.

Whether or not I remember, Jeong Oh, you've always been mine, and you always will be.

His intense gaze, like an unspoken whisper, seemed to say just that.

The light fell on his sculpted muscles, casting shadows across his body, making it impossible not to be captivated. He was beautiful yet maddeningly frustrating.

There was no turning back now. Just as he had, she replied with a complaint rather than an answer.

“You really are terrible.”

“Am I?”

Did her words sound so trivial under his firm grasp?

Jiheon grinned lazily, accepting her critique with a smirk.

An undeniable weight slowly settled over her.

She wanted to act composed, to accept him as if she knew exactly what she was doing, but her nervousness only grew. When their hearts touched, she felt hers beat twice as fast.

As he studied her expression, Jeong Oh tried not to cry; she didn’t want him to pause in concern.

Her vision blurred, white and then black, as waves of emotions crashed over her. At the end of a faint ache, a fullness filled her heart, warmth rising to overwhelm her.

He seemed determined to leave an indelible mark, as if wanting her to know how immovable he was. And eventually, unable to bear it, a tear rolled down her cheek.

“Turn to me.”

“No…”

“Look at me.”

Even as she stifled her sobs, unwilling to show her tears, he gently held her chin, guiding her gaze to him.

Jiheon lowered himself, following the path of her tears with soft kisses, brushing back her hair as it lay strewn across the sheets.

He wanted to comfort her, yet the tremor in her gaze only drew him in further.

Her labored breaths, held back but finally released, spurred him on.

What he saw and heard satisfied him deeply, yet what he hadn’t seen or heard drove his desire for her even more.

The more he got to know her, the more captivated he became. She was the perfect woman, so much so that even the time it took to blink felt too precious to waste.

It was as if he had found his long-lost other half, the one he’d spent a lifetime searching for. Erasing the past and starting anew—all of it felt worth it, as long as he had her.

Yet Jiheon knew well that Jeong Oh was someone who could be loved by anyone. That awareness filled him with a restlessness even as he held her in his arms.

He needed constant reassurance that she was his.

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The early morning light turned blue.

A sense of responsibility woke her up. Jeong Oh opened her eyes in Jiheon’s arms.

“Gasp.”

She was used to waking up while cuddling her tiny, adorable cat, who was barely half her size, so it felt disorienting to wake up in the arms of a man who seemed nearly twice her size.

Carefully, so as not to wake Jiheon, Jeong Oh slid out of the bed.

Jiheon didn’t really need to get up, but as a team member, Jeong Oh had responsibilities with unpacking and assisting with the final arrangements for his return. Quietly picking up the scattered pieces of her clothing, she crouched down by the bed and gazed at him as he slept.

He looks so sweet when he’s sleeping, so why does he have to be so teasing and infuriating when he’s awake?

She could still feel the lingering effects of the previous night’s intensity.

I hope I linger in your mind, too.

“Please remember me,” she prayed silently.

It all felt like a dream. A dream that would vanish come morning, as if he might leave her behind again as soon as he woke up.

But at least in that dream, she’d been happy.

Thinking back to the night before, her cheeks flushed. She covered her face with her hands as she got up, but then she glanced back and saw his phone lying on the bedside table.

Her heart began to race.

If she could just check his messages, just take a look at his call history…

If she could understand how he truly felt about his mother, or how he treated her mother…

It would make her journey a lot easier.

She waved a hand in front of his face. He didn’t react.

He was still fast asleep; he must have been exhausted last night, so surely this was safe, right?

Who knew when she’d have another chance like this?

Jeong Oh nervously reached for Jiheon’s phone and touched the screen.

“Aah!”

The bright light from the screen caught her off guard. She quickly shielded it and looked at Jiheon’s face.

Her heart pounded furiously.

She saw the message icon at the bottom of the home screen. Just as she was about to press it—

“Are you awake?”

Gasp.

His voice was rough with sleep, but he’d caught her. Jeong Oh quickly turned off the phone screen and turned to face him.

“Yes! I thought I’d get started on organizing since there’s a lot to take care of.”

Realizing her tone was way too high-pitched, she mentally kicked herself for her reaction.

Jiheon sat up in bed.

“Let’s head out together.”

“No, I need to shower and change my clothes. I’ll head to my room.”

As she hurriedly got up, he extended his hand and pulled her by the waist.

Thud.

In an instant, she found herself seated back on the bed.

“Shower here.”

Looking down at her with that faint, mischievous smile, his gaze held a mesmerizing intensity.

It was a position that easily brought back memories of last night. It didn’t seem like he intended just to mimic it, though.

That was just his way.

He didn’t do caution; he knew nothing about slowly easing into things.

From the moment they held hands, things had progressed swiftly, and once they’d connected physically, he acted like a man with an insatiable thirst, always wanting more.

Knowing both his past and his present, which she was just beginning to understand, Jeong Oh suddenly felt a pang of fear, instinctively leaning back.

She’d been happy, but she’d also endured a lot of teasing.

“…It hurts,” she murmured.

Her reaction had an unexpectedly immediate effect.

His eyes widened in surprise. “Does it hurt a lot?”

“Well… just a bit.”

“You should have said something.”

The hunger in his eyes faded, replaced by a softer look. He wrapped her in the blanket and gently laid her back down on the bed.

“Stay here and rest. I’ll be quick in the shower.”

After making sure she was comfortable, he checked the time and headed to the bathroom.

Shortly after, the sound of running water filled the room.

“Whew…”

Lying still on the bed, Jeong Oh finally exhaled a sigh of relief.

It was a chance.

The phone, just a few steps away.

Quickly, she reached for it and opened the messaging app. There was no extra security, so she could access it immediately.

The contact labeled “Mother” was quite close to the top. The last message from “Mother” read, “Have a safe trip, son ♥.”

With a trembling hand, she opened the message thread.

Their conversations from the past few weeks appeared at once.

They exchanged texts roughly every four days or so. When his mother sent a long message, Jiheon would usually respond with something short.

He rarely initiated the conversation, and even when he did, it wasn’t anything warm or affectionate.

His mother, on the other hand, was playful and loving, calling him her good son, her handsome son, her sweet son.

It was the classic conversation between a doting mom and a quiet, stoic son.

But as she scrolled down, her hand paused when she reached a particular exchange.

– “I love you, son. You know how much, right?” – “Yes. I love you, too.”

Reading it, she felt her heart, which had been hanging precariously like a piece of fruit on a branch, finally give in and drop to the ground.

The words “I love you.”

Words he had never once said to her.

She set down the phone.

Jiheon had hurried through his shower.

He was worried when she said she was in pain. Maybe it would be best for her to rest longer.

I'll take care of everything, he thought.

"Just stay here, and I'll—"

He stopped mid-sentence as he stepped out of the bathroom, towel in hand.

Jeong Oh was gone.

Walking over slowly, Jiheon sat heavily on the empty bed.

The warmth from when they'd been lying together still lingered on the sheets, but she was no longer there.

He glanced at his phone lying on the bedside table.

Before heading to the shower, he had checked the time and left it there; now it was slightly askew.

She had tried to touch his phone earlier before he had even left the bed.

"Maybe I shouldn't have stopped her then?"

In his recent apps list, the messaging app was open.

He clicked on it.

It was mostly work messages, some of them involving confidential company matters.

A weary sigh escaped his lips.

What had she been looking for?

Ch56 - Romeo and Juliet

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Cough, cough…

“Ah!”

Eunbi, who had been coughing dryly in her sleep, opened her eyes in alarm.

A strange room. Next to her lay a naked stranger.

Startled by Eunbi’s commotion, the man woke up too, blinking as he asked in a lazy voice, “Are you awake?”

“What is this? Wha, wha, what is this?”

“What do you mean, what is it?”

“……”

“You asked to be held.”

With a look of disbelief, the man sighed and went into the bathroom.

Eunbi was startled again, covering her face with the blanket as she glanced at his slender yet muscular back. She checked her own state under the covers. She looked just as disheveled as he did.

‘Did I really ask to be held? Me?’

She couldn’t believe it. The memories she thought were gone quickly resurfaced.

She had been devastated by the news that Jeong Ji-hun had gone on a business trip with Lee Jeong-oh and had gone to a bar alone. There, she had met a man.

Oh my god. Last night, she had clung to the man, crying and begging him to listen to her story as he tried to leave.

And the memory of her saying she felt lonely…

She had dragged a complete stranger to a hotel based solely on his handsome face.

‘What if he’s a playboy?’

From a family of legal professionals. Plus, her father was about to enter politics; she couldn’t create a scandal like this. Eunbi was flustered as she got dressed. She wanted to escape quickly.

However, just as she finished getting dressed and was looking for her bag, the man came out of the bathroom.

“Are you not going to wash up?”

“……”

“Then let’s go out for breakfast.”

Eunbi lost her chance to escape.

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Throughout breakfast, Seung-kyu couldn’t shake off his heavy expression. After finishing his preparations for work, he spoke to his wife, Jin-seo.

“Honey, let’s stop sending Do-bin to the Go academy.”

“Huh? Why?”

“He doesn’t even learn Go anyway.”

“A seven-year-old doesn’t need to learn anything extraordinary. He just likes it, so he goes. It’s good for him to pick up a bit from Ye-na.”

“He should do what he likes, not just follow what Ye-na likes.”

“Kids are all like that.”

Jin-seo smiled lightly while feeding Do-yoon.

Do-bin, unaware of what his parents were discussing, sat on the toilet with the bathroom door wide open, straining.

Seung-kyu frowned even more and said, “It’s tough enough for him, and now he has to worry about Ye-na too.”

“Ye-na isn’t having a hard time. Just keep an eye on him until this month. We’ve already paid the tuition, and Do-bin can’t break up with Ye-na.”

Jin-seo replied casually, as if it were no big deal.

At that moment, Do-bin came running in.

“Mom, I wiped well and washed my hands! Is that good? Did I do well?”

Having just come out from using the toilet, Do-bin showed his freshly washed hands to Jin-seo, acting all cheeky.

“Park Do-bin.”

Seung-kyu called out to him in a serious voice.

“You’re going to stop going to the Go academy. Instead, I’ll send you to the soccer class you like.”

“I like the Go academy more than the soccer class!”

“Then tell me what you learned at the Go academy.”

“Black stones and white stones fight!”

“Next.”

“The one who builds the most houses wins!”

“Do you know how to build houses?”

“Yeah. Like this.”

Do-bin pretended to make squares in the air. Realizing that his son only understood up to that point, Seung-kyu quickly searched for a game problem online and showed him a picture. It was obvious that the white stones had won.

“Look. Who won here?”

As expected, Do-bin couldn’t answer.

“Stop playing Go. Just quit.”

“What about Ye-na?”

“Ye-na is Ye-na, and you are you.”

“I can’t see Ye-na?”

“Park Do-bin.”

“……”

“You know how hard it is for your mom to take you and Ye-na to the Go academy. Now there’s going to be another sibling, so you have to be more responsible.”

Do-bin’s eyes shook as if an earthquake of about magnitude 8 had hit.

“Stop going to the Go academy. Make sure to say goodbye to Ye-na today.”

Excitedly flaring his nostrils, Do-bin squinted at Seung-kyu and asked, “Can you really break up with Mom?”

“Why would I break up with your mom?”

“Then why are you telling me to break up with Ye-na?”

“……”

“Why do you tell me to do something you can’t even do?”

Do-bin shouted defiantly.

Just yesterday, he had promised the girl he liked that he would go to the Go academy for life and always be by her side. Breaking a promise that he should carry in his heart for a lifetime after just one day was not what a man should do.

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The filming team left the hotel early in the morning and quickly wrapped up their schedule in Australia before arriving at the airport.

Since Ji-hun had a different flight from the filming team, they had to part ways at the airport.

“Thank you all for your hard work. See you in Seoul,” Ji-hun said, greeting the filming team while glancing at Jeong-oh, who stood at the edge. After leaving Ji-hun’s room early that morning, Jeong-oh hadn’t returned. She hadn’t even sent a separate text message.

The joy of the previous night had vanished, leaving only the memory of a fleeting aurora. Seeing her expression brought back an anxious feeling as if they had returned to square one.

Regardless, he couldn’t take the lead in something she was extremely cautious about. Ji-hun also brushed past her and boarded an earlier flight.

After parting with Ji-hun, Jeong-oh continued to hesitate.

Last night, she had left Ji-hun’s room without saying a word. She felt embarrassed for having snooped on his messages with his mother, and she

also felt guilty for him being so kind.

She figured he would be upset since she had just left without saying anything. It seemed she should at least send a brief message.

– I’m sorry for leaving first earlier. Have a safe trip.

Jeong-oh sent a short text and let out a long sigh.

Although reality was overwhelming, she couldn’t stay down for long.

Now that she knew the facts, she had a clear direction. She had to prepare to confront his mother.

She needed to pull him away from Jang Young-mi and bring him to Lee Jeong-oh’s side.

To cover up the past, Jang Young-mi’s manipulation likely went beyond just that phone call. She was certain there was something more.

‘It would be nice if I could find even a small clue.’

She had to resolutely stay by his side.

She needed to continuously lead him to recall memories from the past and learn more about his mother.

Jeong-oh sent another text message.

– See you in Seoul. I’ll get in touch.

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After a 14-hour journey, including transfer time, Jeong-oh arrived in Korea.

Her body felt heavy, but the thought of meeting Ye-na filled her heart with energy.

After completing the return procedures together, Deputy Park Young-gwang said to Jeong-oh, “You really worked hard. I’ll drive you. Let’s go together.”

“No, it’s fine. I can take the airport bus. It’s easier to get dropped off near my house.”

Jeong-oh added a bit of a lie to her answer because she wanted the Deputy Park, who had worked the hardest, to get home and rest quickly.

“Oh, really? Okay, then go home and get some rest. Let’s meet the day after tomorrow!”

“Yes. Please drive safely, Deputy. Thank you for your hard work.”

After bidding farewell to Young-gwang, Jeong-oh walked toward the bus terminal. Suddenly, a man approached without making a sound and swiftly grabbed her suitcase.

It was Jeong Ji-hun.

Advertisements

Jeong-oh jumped in surprise and asked, “What are you doing here?”

“You said you wanted to meet.”

“You said to meet in Seoul. This is Incheon.”

Without answering, he quickly walked ahead. Even while pulling her suitcase along, he walked much faster than Jeong-oh. She chased after him, reaching out.

“Please give me my bag. I’ll carry it.”

“Just hurry up and come. Unless you want to get caught by someone.”

At his remark, Jeong-oh was startled and lowered her head.

Having arrived at the airport first, Ji-hun waited for Jeong-oh.

Since he knew what flight she was returning on, all he needed to do was time it right. Fortunately, he was able to spot Jeong-oh without getting noticed by Deputy Park Young-gwang. It was a relief that Jeong-oh hadn't accepted a ride in Deputy Park's car.

Traveling back to Korea alone, he had many thoughts.

Why did she meddle with my phone?

Was it because I seemed anxious? Because I didn't seem trustworthy? Because I looked too easy and carefree?

Did she want to check if there were other women or if I was still in contact with Chae Eun-bi?

If that were the case, it would be somewhat welcome. A bit of obsession could be uplifting for him. He himself was obsessively attached to her in an unusual way.

He rationalized his feelings, thinking that he was not so different from her, who had secretly peeked at his phone.

What Ji Jeong-oh's true intentions were, and what she wanted from him remained unclear, leaving him frustrated, but he couldn't give up on her.

The answer was already apparent.

Ji-hun loaded Jeong-oh's luggage into the parked car and immediately started the engine. As they drove toward Seoul, he spoke without hesitation about what he wanted.

"Tell me everything you said to Song Gi-hoon."

First, they had to sort out Song Gi-hoon.

"I don't like that Song Gi-hoon knows more about Lee Jeong-oh than I do."

Jeong-oh remained silent, seemingly having much to say but sitting still, leaving only provocation as a means of communication.

“And talking about past romantic interests to provoke me is a bad thing. That’s probably why you didn’t have a boyfriend.”

Once again, she glared at him.

There was a silent pressure asking, “Then what are you?”

Ji-hun continued with a playful tone.

“I’m the kind of man who is understanding.”

Suddenly, she let out a sigh. It was unclear whether she disagreed with his joke or if she had other worries. A moment later, a small voice came from her.

“… Can’t I talk about it?”

“…….”

“I still want to talk about it. I want to.”

She was a bit upset with her complaining.

She wanted to talk about her ex-boyfriend?

I had asked Seung-kyu to do some digging, but honestly, I didn’t want to know anything about her ex. I just wanted to confirm whether that jerk was still bothering her.

…I was slightly curious if he was better looking than me, but other than that, I didn’t care.

“Every time you talk about him, I’m going to tease you, you know?”

“Still, I want to.”

She pouted her lips and whined as if she were sulking. It was hard to tell whether she was being coy or playfully annoying. Her tiny voice felt like it was tickling my skin, making it hard to breathe for a moment.

Was she going to make it even harder for me to think straight when I was already in too deep? This woman was definitely not ordinary.

After a moment, she changed the subject and asked, “What do you think your family would say if they found out about me? Like, your mom or dad…”

Her voice was extremely cautious this time.

I could guess what she was worried about. Speaking confidently about a familiar topic, Jiheon replied firmly.

“I’m going to tell my mom.”

“…Why?”

“Because Eun-bi might say something first. It’s better for you to hear it from me than from her.”

“……”

“I won’t let anyone touch Jeong-o. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“How can I believe that?”

I wanted to give her a sense of certainty, but as soon as Jiheon finished speaking, she pouted again.

Startled by her sudden change in tone, he turned to look at her. Jeong-o felt a pang of regret for showing her emotions so openly.

He answered calmly.

“If you can’t trust me, then you’ll just have to watch and see.”

He meant he would show it through his actions.

Even so, Jeong-o couldn’t feel at ease.

She could trust him, but she could never trust his mother. She wanted to ask him directly.

“Your mom or me?”

If your mother and I were standing on opposite sides of the world, which way would you go?

But for some reason, she felt like she would lose if she brought it up, so she couldn’t voice the question.

To hold my hand, you might have to turn your back on your mother. Is that still okay?

After a moment of hesitation, Jeong-o asked Jiheon for a favor.

“Can you not tell her about me? Not to your mom.”

“But Eun-bi might say something first.”

“You could stop Eun-bi from saying anything, too.”

“……”

“Can’t you do that?”

“……”

“Is it impossible?”

“Let me think about it.”

Jiheon smirked slightly, knowing how to make good use of requests.

He stretched out his right hand and stroked her cheek. As he tucked her hair behind her ear and brushed her earlobe, she tilted her head, seemingly tickled.

Unable to hold back any longer, she grabbed his hand, kissed his palm, and placed it gently on the center box.

Squeak.

Eventually, Jiheon parked the car in the middle of the road.

As he unfastened his seatbelt and leaned closer, Jeong-o felt a rush of anxiety. The same fiery light from last night filled his eyes.

“Oh, no.”

“Why is it okay for you but not for me?”

“It’s not allowed. Only what I do is okay. You can’t.”

Only I can. You can’t.

It was her words, not his.

It was enough to provoke his temper.

He wasn’t foolish enough to accept such a cheeky assertion.

He lowered his head and captured her lips. It felt like the exhaustion from the journey finally washed away.

Ch57 - Hello, Ye-na

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As I was heading to Seoul, the sun had completely set. The closer we got to home, the more flushed Jeong-o's face became.

The woman who had been so cautious and guarded when I first approached her was now looking out the window, her shoulders shaking with excitement. Jiheon felt a little petulant.

I'm the one who feels so regretful about parting with you, and you're the one who looks so delighted.

"Are you that happy?"

"Of course! It's been a while since I've seen my daughter."

While my secret meetings with Jiheon were nice, the thrill of being able to see Ye-na couldn't compare. This was the first time I had been away from my daughter for such a long period. The thought of rushing to hug Ye-na already made Jeong-o's heart race.

"Please stop here. It's quicker to walk from here."

As soon as she spotted the convenience store on the corner, Jeong-o hurriedly said.

When Jiheon parked the car, she flung the door open.

"Thank you for today! I'll see you the day after tomorrow!"

It was a simple farewell, devoid of any romantic sentiment.

The sweet and sticky atmosphere that had enveloped us just an hour ago seemed to be tossed aside onto the road.

Not even waiting for his farewell, she dashed off, leaving Jiheon feeling frustrated again.

Jeong-o hurried up the stairs and stood in front of the front door. She was so excited that her eyes were already welling up with tears.

From inside the house, she thought she could hear the voice of her favorite animated character. She opened the door and rushed in.

“Princess Ye-na!”

“Mommy!”

Ye-na, who had spread out a blanket in front of the TV and was doing somersaults while waiting for her mom, ran to the entrance at the sound of her voice.

“Mommy!”

Oh, what a cutie!

Jeong-o scooped up her little princess and playfully shook her. Soon, Kook-soon followed behind.

As if they had seen each other yesterday or the day before, Kook-soon casually asked how things were.

“Did you eat?”

“I had a lot of in-flight meals.”

“Will that be enough? You should eat more when you get home.”

“Mom, where’s my present?”

Ye-na asked, hanging onto Jeong-o’s waist. Meanwhile, Kook-soon took the bag that Jeong-o had brought and wiped the wheels. Jeong-o opened the bag and handed Ye-na her gift. It was a plush toy of a kangaroo with a baby kangaroo in its pouch.

“Wow!”

As soon as Ye-na received the toy, she hugged it tightly as if she had fallen in love. A moment later, with the toy tucked under her arm, she ran to her room and came back with a sketchbook.

“Mom, I drew a picture!”

The drawing, showing a mother and daughter, looked as affectionate as Jeong-o and Ye-na themselves, and Jeong-o couldn’t help but admire it after a long time.

“Wow! Did you draw me and Ye-na? It’s so pretty!”

“No, it’s a kangaroo.”

“Wow! It’s a kangaroo! What a pretty kangaroo!”

Jeong-o quickly changed her words and cheered even more enthusiastically. Kook-soon laughed as if she couldn’t help it.

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At the same time,

Doh-bin’s house felt like a funeral home.

At his father’s insistence to quit the go academy, Doh-bin burst into tears like a waterfall.

“I’m going to keep going! Ba-dukk! Ba-dukk!”

“Park Doh-bin, can’t you stop?”

“I’m going to the go academy! I’m going to the go academy!”

Even when Seung-kyu sternly urged him, it was useless.

Doh-bin lay sprawled on the living room floor, kicking the air in frustration. His stubbornness was fiercer than a rabid animal, revealing its vicious teeth.

Jin-seo, feeling disappointed, complained to Seung-kyu.

“It hasn’t even been that long since he got close to Ye-na. Why does it have to be like this? He’s only seven. So what if his learning ability drops a bit? As long as he enjoys going, that’s what matters.”

“It’s hard for him.”

“No, it’s not hard. I said I’d take him there and bring him back myself. Why are you doing this?”

As Jin-seo kept asking for reasons, Seung-kyu turned his head away. Feeling suspicious, Jin-seo turned his head back toward Seung-kyu and asked again.

“Just be honest. Is it because you feel sorry for me, or is it because you don’t want to spend the tuition?”

“……”

“Just say it. What’s the problem?”

With his wife pressing him this much, Seung-kyu had no choice but to admit the truth with a long sigh.

“Ye-na’s mom’s name is Lee Jeong-o.”

“Right. Lee Jeong-o.”

“She’s a copywriter at our company. Assistant Lee Jeong-o.”

“Oh. Max Planning?”

“Yeah.”

“Then that’s even better! What’s the problem with that?”

Seung-kyu sighed again.

“Jiheon likes Assistant Lee Jeong-o.”

“I heard Jiheon has a girlfriend. Isn’t it Eun-bin or something?”

“No. That’s fake. The one he really likes is Assistant Lee Jeong-o.”

Jin-seo blinked blankly for a moment, then tilted her head and asked,

“But why?”

“She’s the mother of his child.”

“……”

“He hid the fact that she’s a single mother from Jiheon.”

“…So, does Ji-heon say that you shouldn’t meet Ye-na’s mom anymore? For his sake?”

“No, Ji-heon doesn’t know yet that Ye-na’s mom is Lee Jeong-oh.”

This was already Seung-kyu’s third sigh.

“He’s worried that he might get too attached. He can’t wish for a happy ending with a single mother.”

“Hey, Park Seung-kyu.”

His wife called his name in a tone as if she were calling their son, Dabin. It was a rare occurrence, happening perhaps only once a year. Seung-kyu straightened up, feeling the tension in his shoulders.

He could see the lightning flashing in his wife’s eyes.

He had forgotten for a moment just how intimidating she could be.

“Ji-gi, Ji-heon likes her, right? Who are you to judge and make assumptions?”

As a loving husband, he tried to listen to what she said, knowing it would lead to harmony in their home. But today, Jin-seo felt deeply disappointed in her husband.

It was his foolishness for knowing one thing and missing out on two.

“Ye-na’s mom is so wonderful, so outstanding! She’s way better than I am! I’m here, thinking about having a third child even though I have a stable husband and parents, while Ye-na’s mom has raised a child alone without a husband! Do you know what it’s like to go through the pain of childbirth? Huh?”

Her voice had grown louder.

The frustrations of being pregnant with a third child only added to her anger.

“I wanted to put Dabin and Doyun, who were inside me, into your belly for just one day. You wouldn’t understand that feeling. You’ll never know it until you die.”

As she erupted in anger, Seung-kyu bit his lips to hold back his words.

But at least it was a good thing that he was a man who could understand when shouted at.

Jin-seo sternly ordered him.

“Tell Ji-heon the truth right away. And you stay out of it.”

She firmly believed in her intuition. The Lee Jeong-oh she knew was definitely not a bad person. Just because Ji-heon became close to Lee Jeong-oh wouldn’t mean his life would fall apart. She was sure of it.

“Don’t hurt Ye-na or her mom. If you do, I won’t stay quiet.”

“…”

“Don’t make my son cry.”

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

The next day.

Having hurriedly postponed work to go on a business trip, Ji-heon returned to the office in the afternoon with a lot to catch up on.

— Are you back in the office?

Shortly after he entered his office, a text message from his friend Seung-kyu arrived. Seung-kyu had been looking for Ji-heon multiple times that day.

Ji-heon sent a reply and waited for Seung-kyu.

He had a hunch about what this was about. He had probably finished his investigation on Lee Jeong-oh.

However, Ji-heon felt a growing sense of tension. Was it really something urgent enough to reach out several times?

He hoped it wouldn’t be anything terrible—like Lee Jeong-oh still meeting her ex-boyfriend.

Yet, considering the child involved, it seemed natural for the child’s father to continue to be a part of her life. The child would miss their father, and she would need child support as well.

How much of her story could he truly understand? Ultimately, it was a matter of his own feelings.

In the end, no matter how horrific her story might be, it wouldn’t change how he felt about her, so he thought it unnecessary to hear the results of

Seung-kyu’s investigation.

While he was lost in thought, Seung-kyu walked into the office.

“Did you have a good business trip?”

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

“Thanks to me? What do you mean?”

Seung-kyu’s expression was heavy as he responded. Ji-heon invited him to take a seat and sat down across from him.

Without dragging it out, he asked directly.

“Did you find out?”

“Yeah.”

“Is there no man?”

“They say there’s no man…”

“What about the kid’s dad? Do you know what her ex-boyfriend is like?”

“It seems hard to figure that out, too…”

“Then that’s fine.”

A smile quickly appeared on Ji-heon’s face. He didn’t need to hear more. But Seung-kyu’s expression remained grim.

“No, there’s something more important, my friend.”

“…”

“Do you remember Ye-na? Dabin’s friend, Ye-na.”

Ji-heon froze.

The smile that had formed on his lips vanished.

Ah.

In that moment, he didn’t know why he felt that way. A sudden wave rose in his heart.

It was like finding the bluebird he had been searching for right next to him.

The feeling he had when he found a puzzle piece that had been scattered throughout the house right there on his desk.

“…They say that her mom is Lee Jeong-oh.”

Seeing Ji-heon’s stunned expression, Seung-kyu jumped up and waved his hands.

“I didn’t know! I really didn’t! According to your wife, it wasn’t Ye-na’s mom who approached them, but Dabin’s mom who made the first move. Dabin’s mom was trying to get close to Lee Jeong-oh. She thought it would be nice for Dabin and Ye-na to be friends because Ye-na is so smart and capable…”

He was excited, worried he might be misunderstood.

“At least it’s clear she didn’t use Ye-na to get close to you. Your wife is even more convinced than I am. I don’t know how you feel about it…”

But Ji-heon said.

“I thought so.”

“What?”

“I couldn’t stop thinking about it.”

He just smiled faintly.

Now he understood why his feelings for the child were so overwhelming.

Because she resembled him too much.

It felt like his buried feelings had already made a decision long ago; somehow, he felt relieved.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After the long preparation for a competitive PT and a weekend business trip, Jeong-oh finally received a day off.

Although it was a short one-day vacation, she could relax for the first time in a while. Well, she wasn’t really resting; she simply wasn’t going to work.

After dropping her child off at daycare, she helped her mother, Guk-soon, with her restaurant work during lunch. Unfortunately, she was blessed with a magical skill that turned any food she touched into something inedible, so she didn’t help with cooking but focused on serving instead. Even so, it was incredibly busy.

Guk-soon urged her to go inside and rest, but Jeong-oh stubbornly insisted on helping with the dishes.

After working hard, it was already time for Ye-na to go to her after-school academy.

Today, Jeong-oh had decided to take Dabin and Ye-na to their academy. She also planned to invite Dabin, Doyun, and Jin-seo over for dinner in the evening, wanting to express her gratitude for all the hard work Jin-seo had been doing.

After first stopping by the daycare to pick up Ye-na, they walked to the pretty songbird daycare to get Dabin and then took a taxi. In the taxi, the children’s cheerful voices filled the air.

Dabin looked especially moved today. Seeing Dabin hold Ye-na’s hand tightly and not let go made Jeong-oh smile brightly.

When they arrived in front of the academy and got out of the taxi, her phone rang with a call from Jin-seo.

“Yes, Dabin’s mom. We just arrived in front of the academy with Dabin and Ye-na.”

Thinking that Jin-seo was worried, Jeong-oh picked up the phone to share the news.

[Jeong-oh, Ye-na’s mom, actually I have something to tell you.] But it was about something else entirely.

“Yes, what is it?”

Sure! Here’s the translated text:

—

“…So Jiheon said not to meet Yena’s mom anymore? To him?”

“No. Jiheon doesn’t know yet that Yena’s mom is Lee Jeong-oh’s agent.”

By now, Seung-kyu let out his third sigh.

“He’s worried that Jiheon might get too attached. You can’t hope for a single mother to be in a good situation, can you?”

“Hey, Park Seung-kyu.”

She called her husband’s name as if summoning her son, Dobin, from the sky. It was a rare occurrence, maybe once a year. Seung-kyu’s shoulders, which had been drooping, straightened up.

He could see the lightning flashing in his wife’s two eyes.

He had temporarily forgotten just how frightening she was.

“You said Jiheon likes her. Who are you to judge so freely?”

She was trying hard to maintain peace in their family because she loved her husband. She made an effort to listen to him, as it usually led to a peaceful home. But today, Jin-seo was greatly disappointed in her husband.

In his foolishness, knowing one thing but not the other.

“How wonderful is Yena’s mom, how wonderful! Much more wonderful than I am! I have a perfectly fine husband, and both of my parents are around, yet I’m still considering having a third child, and Yena’s mom had her child alone, without a husband! Do you even know what it’s like to give birth to a child? Huh?”

Her voice had grown louder.

The sorrow of being pregnant with a third child added to her anger today, overwhelming her emotions.

“If I could, I would have wanted to put Dobin and Doyun, who were once in my belly, in yours for just a day. You wouldn’t understand that feeling. You never will.”

As she yelled, Seung-kyu hid his lips in silence.

At least it was fortunate that he was the type of man who would understand if scolded.

Jin-seo firmly ordered him, “You have to tell Jeong Jiheon the truth immediately. And you should stay out of it.”

She had strong faith in her instincts. She knew that Lee Jeong-oh was definitely not a bad person. Just because Jiheon and Jeong-oh had become friends wouldn’t mean Jiheon’s life would fall into despair. She could assure that.

“Don’t hurt Yena or her mom. If you do, I won’t just stand by.”

“……”

“Don’t let any tears fall from my son’s eyes.”

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The next day.

Having rushed back from a business trip, there was much work waiting for Jiheon. He returned to the office in the afternoon after going out to various places.

“Are you in the office?”

Not long after entering his office, a text message from his friend Seung-kyu arrived. Seung-kyu had reached out to Jiheon several times that day.

Jiheon replied and waited for Seung-kyu.

He could guess the reason. He must have finished investigating Lee Jeong-oh.

However, he wondered if it was really urgent enough for multiple messages. Jiheon felt a twinge of nervousness.

He hoped it wasn’t something terrible, like Jeong-oh still seeing her ex-boyfriend.

But if it involved a child, it was only natural to continue seeing the child’s father. The child would miss the father, and they would need child support too.

How much could he understand her story? Ultimately, it was a matter of her feelings.

Still, it seemed that whatever horrific tale she had wouldn’t change his feelings much, so there wasn’t a need to hear the investigation results from Seung-kyu.

While he was pondering, Seung-kyu entered the office.

“Did you have a good business trip?”

“Yeah. Thanks to you.”

“Thanks? What do you mean?”

Seung-kyu’s expression looked serious. Jiheon offered him a seat and sat across from him.

Without dragging it out, he asked directly, “Did you find out anything?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s no man, right?”

“They say there’s no man…”

“What about the baby’s father? You don’t even know what kind of guy her ex-boyfriend is?”

“It seems that’s not very clear either…”

“Well, that’s fine.”

A smile quickly appeared on Jiheon’s face. There was no need to hear more. However, Seung-kyu’s expression still wasn’t bright.

“No, there’s something more important. My friend.”

“……”

“You know Yena? Dobin’s friend, Yena.”

Jiheon paused.

The smile that had been on his lips faded.

Ah.

At that moment, he didn’t know why he felt that way. A sharp wave of emotion rose from his chest.

It felt like finding the bluebird he had been searching for all over the world right next to him.

Like discovering a puzzle piece that had made him rummage around the house right on his desk.

"……Yena's mom is Lee Jeong-oh's agent."

Seeing Jiheon's blank expression, Seung-kyu jumped up and waved his hands.

"I had no idea! I really didn't know! According to my wife, it wasn't Yena's mom who approached us first, but Dobin's mom who initiated contact. She tried to get close to Lee Jeong-oh because Yena is so smart and capable, thinking it would be nice for Dobin and Yena to be friends…"

He was too excited to avoid being misunderstood.

"At least she didn't use Yena to approach you. That much is certain. My wife is more convinced than I am. I don't know how it was for you, but…"

But Jiheon said, "I thought so."

"What?"

"I kept thinking about it."

He just smiled faintly.

Now he understood why he felt so moved whenever he saw the child.

Because she resembled him so much.

His latent feelings seemed to have already reached a conclusion a long time ago, leaving him with a strange sense of relief.

"Can you help me out a bit?"

Jiheon asked his friend again.

"You're right. I really need to ask for your help."

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After a long competition preparing for a presentation and a weekend business trip, Jeong-oh received a short one-day vacation.

Even though it was a short break, Jeong-oh could finally relax for the first time in a while. Well, she wasn't exactly resting; she just didn't go to the office.

After sending the child to daycare, she helped at her mom Guk-soon's restaurant during lunchtime. She had the magical talent to make food taste terrible whenever she touched it, so she couldn't help with cooking, but she served instead. Nevertheless, it was quite busy.

Guk-soon urged her to go rest, but Jeong-oh stubbornly insisted on doing the dishes.

After moving around so busily, it was soon time for Yena to go to her baduk (Go) academy.

Today, Jeong-oh had planned to take Dobin and Yena to the academy. In the evening, she also planned to invite Dobin and Doyun to their house. She wanted to express her gratitude to Jin-seo, knowing how much she had suffered recently.

She first stopped by the daycare to pick up Yena and walked with her to the kids' baduk academy to pick up Dobin. They took a taxi together. In the taxi, the children's cheerful voices never ceased.

Dobin looked particularly thrilled today. Seeing him hold Yena's hand tightly without letting go made Jeong-oh smile.

When they arrived in front of the academy, Jeong-oh received a call from Jin-seo.

"Yes, Dobin's mom, we just arrived at the academy with Dobin and Yena."

Thinking Jin-seo was worried, Jeong-oh answered the call right away to give her the news.

[Jeong-oh, there’s something I need to tell you.]
However, it was about something else.

“Yes, what is it?”

[You remember I told you Dobin has a friend? I wonder if Yena might have mentioned it, but that person has gotten really close to Yena lately.]

Completely unexpected, the topic made Jeong-oh’s eyes widen.

“Oh, you mean the person who played baduk with Yena, right?”

[Yes, yes! That person. I heard he went on an overseas business trip and bought a gift. He wants to give it to Yena and Dobin together.]

“Oh, no! That’s not necessary. It’s fine.”

[He said he thought about it and bought the gift, so it’s hard to just say it’s okay. It’s a bit awkward, but…]
“……”

[He said he would pass by the academy, so would you like to meet him?]
She would usually refuse, but

[Yena’s mom must be curious about what kind of uncle Yena is talking about, so I thought it would be nice to see each other’s faces. What should I tell him?]
Jeong-oh changed her mind under Jin-seo’s persuasion. She thought it wasn’t something worth worrying about.

After all, this person was someone she was grateful to. Since he cherished Yena so much, Jeong-oh was curious about his face too.

‘Oh, it’s not because Mom said he’s handsome that I’m curious.’

She hid her slightly guilty feelings and replied to Jin-seo.

“Yes, then I’ll meet him here and greet him. The kids will recognize him easily since they know what he looks like.”

Jeong-oh spoke lightly and hung up the phone.

“Mom, what’s up?”

As soon as she hung up, Yena looked up with round eyes and asked.

“Do you remember the uncle who came over to Dobin’s house before?”

“I know! The baduk uncle!”

Dobin was the first to answer Jeong-oh’s question.

“Right. The baduk uncle. He’s coming here.”

“Why?”

“He says he’s bringing a gift.”

“Is it for Yena?”

“What about Dobin’s gift?”

Following Yena, Dobin’s eyes sparkled with excitement as he asked.

“He said there are gifts for both Yena and Dobin.”

“Wow!”

The kids jumped up in their spots, clapping their hands. They were at the age where gifts could be received without any burden.

Jeong-oh felt a little of her own burden lifted.

They could gratefully accept a gift given just for the cuteness of the child.

Jeong-oh held the hands of the two children and waited for ‘that person’ to arrive.

Soon, a car stopped a few steps away.

“Um….”

Jeong-oh hesitated.

She recognized the car that she had seen many times. The vehicle was one she was now familiar with.

Before she could confirm the person, her nose tingled.

Soon, the driver’s side door opened, and a man stepped out.

“Uncle!”

“Mr.!”

The children ran over, each calling out a name they could easily say.

Jeong-oh felt rooted to the spot as if her feet were stuck to the ground.

Jiheon first approached and lightly tapped Dobin on the shoulder, asking.

“Have you been well, Dobin?”

His voice, a little dry but gentle, felt like the cool breeze of a summer evening in Jeong-oh’s ears.

“Yes!”

Dobin answered bravely.

Jiheon then turned his gaze toward Yena, who stood behind.

Taking a step forward, Jiheon knelt on one knee to match Yena’s height.

Once.

In the past.

A scene that always needed a “one day” prefix.

While she could imagine it with her eyes closed, it always felt distant when her eyes were open.

That very scene was now in front of Jeong-oh.

He greeted Yena, “Hello, Yena.”

Ah.

A hot breath escaped her lips without her realizing it. Jeong-oh covered her mouth, surprised by her own reaction.

Ch58 - Why Did You Do That?

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“Hello!”

Yena greeted cheerfully. Then she pointed to Jeong-oh, who was still a bit hesitant to approach.

“Uncle, this is my mom. My mom is a copywriter.”

Jeong-oh was still frozen in shock, her expression clearly showing her surprise.

Jiheon understood her reaction; he felt the same way.

He decided to be honest with Yena.

“I know, too.”

“How do you know?”

“I also work at that company.”

“Wait? Uncle, you also work at my mom’s company?”

Yena turned to Jeong-oh, asking.

“Uh…”

Jeong-oh finally managed to open her mouth to answer, but she was at a loss for words.

“Uncle, what about the gift?”

Dobin’s question quickly shifted the topic.

Jiheon opened the passenger door and took out two boxes to give to the kids.

“Wow! It’s a koala!”

One side of the box was opened, making it easy to see the contents. Dobin shouted out when he recognized the koala stuffed animal.

Jeong-oh also recognized the boxes the kids were holding.

Was it just the day before yesterday? It was when the traffic accident happened in front of Flinders Street Station in Melbourne during lunch.

After hearing about the situation from the police who had arrived at the scene, Jeong-oh found herself waiting for the road to be cleared. So, she stopped by a nearby souvenir shop.

Fortunately, the shop had the kangaroo plushie Yena had mentioned. Just as she picked up the kangaroo plushie in excitement, Jiheon walked into the store.

Thinking Jiheon was following her, Jeong-oh rushed to the counter to pay and then left using the door opposite to where Jiheon had entered.

She had managed to escape, but he was also buying a gift.

The koala plushie that had been next to the kangaroo came back to her mind, making Jeong-oh feel a bit awkward.

In any case, it was fortunate that she hadn’t run into him back then. If she had suggested the kangaroo plushies for the kids, Yena would have only received two of those.

With her mouth agape, Yena tore open the box and pulled out the stuffed animal, hugging it tightly. The baby koala hanging on the back of the

mother koala looked just like Yena.

“Yena, you should say thank you.”

“Thank you, Uncle!”

“Thank you, Uncle!”

Following Yena, Dobin also expressed his gratitude loudly.

“Thank you for taking care of my daughter too. … It’s time for the kids to go to their academy.”

Jeong-oh bowed slightly and mentioned their next schedule, indicating they would be leaving.

Her nose felt tingly and her eyes were hot, making it hard to look at him any longer. If tears fell, it seemed her rationality would collapse as well.

She needed to think, but it felt like her mind was temporarily paralyzed. In fact, she had already achieved her first goal: to show Yena to him. He still didn’t know that Yena was his daughter, so it was only half accomplished.

The scene she had only imagined created a wave of emotions even greater than she had anticipated. Instead of joy, it felt overwhelming, and on the other hand, her heart ached, leaving her in a daze.

Despite her boundaries, Jiheon’s feelings diverged from her intentions.

“Take care. Let’s talk a bit.”

Jeong-oh felt trapped. However, she couldn’t show her conflict in front of the children. She didn’t respond to Jiheon and instead took Yena and Dobin’s hands.

“Let’s go to the academy. Say goodbye to Uncle.”

“Goodbye, Uncle!”

“Goodbye, Uncle!”

The children waved their hands while following Jeong-oh’s words.

She led the kids to the academy.

“Today, Yena’s mom came!”

As they entered, the academy director greeted them warmly. Jeong-oh also returned the greeting.

“Yes, hello!”

“Good to see you. If you have some time, could we talk for a moment? I have something to tell you.”

She had just intended to say hello and leave, but the director guided Jeong-oh inside.

‘He must be waiting outside.’

For a moment, she felt worried about Jiheon. But her concern for Yena pushed that thought away.

What could he want to talk about? Did Yena seem very gloomy? Did someone tease her for being from a single-parent family?

Jeong-oh entered the director’s office, feeling nervous.

However, the topic the director brought up was completely different from her worries.

“Yena’s mom, do you know Yena is smart?”

“Ah…”

“She’s very smart. She’s the smartest seven-year-old I’ve taught so far. Her ability to analyze moves is exceptional.”

Jeong-oh was quite surprised by the director's words.

It was amazing. She had never taught Yena Go (baduk) before.

Six months ago, Yena had suddenly said she wanted to go to a Go academy, and Jeong-oh had sent her there. Yena was indeed a very smart child, but it was hard for a seven-year-old to grasp the rules of Go. Jeong-oh had thought Yena would lose interest after a month or two, yet here they were, six months later.

The little girl who couldn't even open a bottle of water on her own sparkled with excitement whenever she held a Go stone.

"If you're okay with it, I'd like to teach her well. There are many Go competitions for kids as well. Yena has a strong competitive spirit, so I think participating in competitions would motivate her. What do you think?"

"Well, I think I need to ask Yena first."

"To be honest, I asked Yena indirectly about it. When I mentioned the competitions, her eyes lit up. She probably wants to meet peers she can compete with."

The child was growing up much faster than she realized.

It was fascinating how she was carving out her own path.

Mr. Jeong Jiheon, my daughter is a genius.

Hearing about her daughter made her heart race and brought her more joy than receiving praise herself.

Jeong-oh finished her conversation with the academy director and stepped outside. Jiheon was standing right outside the door.

"I was wondering why you weren't coming out."

Before she could ask why he was standing there, Jiheon spoke first. He seemed to think she was deliberately avoiding him by not coming out of the academy.

Before Jeong-oh could lose her train of thought, Jiheon took her hand.

“Let’s go down.”

He held her hand tightly, as if afraid she would pull away. Only when she matched her steps beside him did his grip loosen.

They sat facing each other on a bench in front of a convenience store. Jiheon handed Jeong-oh a refreshing drink. Jeong-oh’s lips were parched, but she couldn’t bring herself to take a sip.

“Aren’t you going to work?”

“I left work early.”

“Oh.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Hello!”

Yena greeted cheerfully. She then pointed towards Jeong-o, who was standing further back.

“That’s my mom. My mom is a copywriter.”

Jeong-o was still unable to approach, her expression frozen in surprise.

Ji-heon understood her reaction. He felt the same way.

He honestly confessed to Yena, “I know.”

“How do you know?”

“I also work at that company.”

“Wait, Uncle! You also work at my mom’s company?”

Yena turned to Jeong-o and asked.

“Uh…”

Jeong-o managed to open her mouth, struggling to respond. She was at a loss for words, finding it hard to say anything more.

“Uncle, what about the gift?”

Do-bin’s question quickly shifted the topic.

Ji-heon opened the passenger door and took out two boxes to hand to the children.

“Wow! A koala!”

One side of the box had a hole, allowing the contents to be seen immediately. Do-bin shouted excitedly upon recognizing the koala plushie.

Jeong-o also recognized the boxes the children were holding.

Was it the day before yesterday during lunch? It was when the traffic accident happened in front of Flinders Street Station in Melbourne.

After hearing updates from the police who arrived at the scene and realizing they had to wait for the road to clear, Jeong-o had entered a nearby souvenir shop.

Fortunately, the shop had the kangaroo plushie Yena had mentioned. When Jeong-o joyfully picked up the kangaroo plushie, Ji-heon walked into the store.

Jeong-o thought Ji-heon was following her, so she quickly ran to the register to pay and left through a different door than the one Ji-heon entered.

In that moment, she had made her escape, but he had also been planning to buy a gift.

The koala plushie next to the kangaroo was now on her mind. Jeong-o felt a bit awkward recalling it.

In any case, it was a relief that they hadn't run into each other at that time. If she had advised him that the kangaroo plushie would be a good gift, Yena would have ended up with two kangaroo plushies instead.

Yena's mouth was agape as she tore open the box and pulled out the plushie, hugging it tightly. The baby koala clinging to its mother looked just like Yena.

"Yena, you should say thank you."

"Thank you, Uncle!"

"Thank you, Uncle!"

Do-bin followed Yena's lead, greeting him enthusiastically.

"I appreciate you taking care of my daughter. …It's time for the kids to go to their academy now."

Jeong-o bowed slightly and mentioned their next schedule, indicating they would be leaving.

Her nose felt tingly and her eyes were hot, making it difficult for her to face him any longer. She feared that if she let her tears fall, her emotional defenses would crumble.

She needed to think, but her mind felt temporarily paralyzed. In fact, she had achieved her first goal: to show him Yena. Since he still didn't know that Yena was his daughter, it was only half accomplished, but still.

The scene she had imagined stirred up emotions more intense than she had expected. It was overwhelming rather than joyous, and at the same time, her heart ached, leaving her numb.

Jeong-o had drawn a line, but Ji-heon's heart was different from her intentions.

"Take care. Let's talk for a bit."

Jeong-o felt stuck, as if she couldn't move. However, it was impossible to show any conflict in front of the children. Jeong-o didn't respond to Ji-heon and took Yena and Do-bin's hands.

"Let's go to the academy. Say goodbye to Uncle."

"Goodbye, Uncle!"

"Goodbye, Uncle!"

The children waved as they followed Jeong-o's instructions.

Jeong-o took the kids up to the academy.

"Yena's mom came today!"

As she opened the door and entered, the academy's headmaster greeted her warmly. Jeong-o replied.

"Yes. Hello!"

"That's great! If you have time, could we talk for a moment? I have something to discuss."

Jeong-o had only intended to greet him, but the headmaster guided her inside.

'He must be waiting outside.'

For a moment, she was worried about Ji-heon. However, her concern for Yena pushed that worry aside.

What did he want to talk about? Did Yena look particularly down? Did someone tease her because she came from a single-parent family?

Jeong-o followed the headmaster into his office, feeling nervous.

However, the topic the headmaster brought up was entirely different from her worries.

“Yena’s mother, did you know that Yena is really smart?”

“Ah…”

“She’s incredibly bright. Among the seven-year-olds I’ve taught so far, she’s the smartest. Her ability to analyze moves is exceptional.”

The headmaster’s words surprised her greatly.

It was fascinating. She had never taught Yena how to play Go.

Six months ago, Yena suddenly expressed a desire to attend the Go academy, and Jeong-o had enrolled her. While she was indeed a very smart child, the rules of Go wouldn’t be easy for a seven-year-old to grasp. She thought Yena would quickly lose interest after a month or two, but six months had already passed.

That little kid who couldn’t even open a bottle of water shone brightly whenever she held a Go stone.

“If you’re okay with it, I’d like to teach her well. There are many tournaments for young Go prodigies. I think Yena would benefit from the competition because she has a strong competitive spirit. What do you think?”

“Well, I think I should ask Yena first.”

“To be honest, I hinted at it to Yena. When I mentioned the tournament, her eyes sparkled with excitement. She probably wants to meet peers she can compete with.”

The child was growing up much faster than she realized.

It was fascinating that Yena was forging her own path.

Ji-heon, huh? Our daughter is a prodigy.

Hearing about her daughter made Jeong-o's heart race and feel happier than just hearing compliments about herself.

After finishing the conversation with the academy headmaster, Jeong-o stepped outside. Ji-heon was standing right outside the door.

"You weren't coming out, so…"

Before Jeong-o could ask why he was standing there, Ji-heon spoke first. He seemed to think she was avoiding him by not coming out of the academy.

Just as she was about to have different thoughts, Ji-heon grabbed her hand.

"Let's go down."

He held her hand tightly, as if fearing she would pull away. Only after they walked side by side did his grip loosen.

They sat facing each other on a bench in front of a convenience store. Ji-heon handed Jeong-o a cold drink. Though Jeong-o's lips were dry, she couldn't bring herself to drink.

"Aren't you going to work?"

"I got off early."

"Oh."

Ji-heon hid his smile at her blank reaction.

To me, it's a delightful connection, but it might be a burden to you.

She must have been very surprised. Maybe she thought I was scary.

After all this time, I've been quite obsessed, so she might think this coincidence is all part of my plan.

Or does she feel pressure from all sides? I followed her around at work, and now I’m doing this outside of work?

Of course, I want to hold her tightly so she can never escape me.

While there is an instinctual desire for that, I want to pressure her but I’m not.

I only hope she doesn’t run away again. Though there’s nowhere left to run now.

He concealed his selfish feelings and made excuses.

“You might not believe me, but I really didn’t know. I found out while asking for your phone number to give Yena a gift.”

It wasn’t entirely a lie. His plan did include giving Yena a gift.

The day before yesterday, Ji-heon had entered the souvenir shop following Jeong-o in Melbourne and failed to catch her, ending up buying a gift. Although he bought it by chance, he certainly thought of Yena while shopping with Do-bin and the other siblings.

As he began to speak, Jeong-o shook her head.

“No, I’m the one who…”

“…”

“I didn’t know. Really.”

Jeong-o couldn’t suspect his words anymore.

If she had known before his business trip abroad, she would have found a way to bring it up first. Knowing Ji-heon’s impulsive nature, Jeong-o could quickly accept it.

If he wasn’t Yena’s biological father and just a normal colleague, she might have found it a bit scary.

The thrill of that connection continued to torment her heart, but Jeong-o tried hard to calm down and asked another question.

“Have you played Go before?”

“I used to like it when I was a kid.”

“I didn’t know that either.”

“I never told you, so you couldn’t know.”

“Exactly. Why didn’t you tell me? You should have.”

This meant she hadn’t known about it even seven years ago. She was hearing for the first time that he could play Go.

Ji-heon, unaware of her feelings, found her little complaint endearing and laughed. After his laughter, a bit of an aching feeling washed over him.

Her world is much bigger than I thought.

He couldn’t surpass Yena for the rest of

his life. He had to accept that, but he felt uneasy about the child’s father.

Jeong-o had once spoken about her ex-boyfriend. She had said he was doing very well.

Now, they didn’t contact each other, but the guy could show up anytime, having a beautiful daughter.

Would Jeong-o waver? After all, he was the father of the child.

That absolutely can’t happen.

Can I win against the child’s father?

His desire to ask about the child’s father stuck in his throat, torturing him. He barely tried to part his lips when a woman’s voice called from the other

side.

“Yena’s mom!”

Recognizing Jin-seo, Jeong-o jumped to her feet. Ji-heon also stood up.

Today’s meeting was a collaborative effort of Jin-seo, Seung-kyu, and Ji-heon. Ji-heon had asked Seung-kyu to introduce Yena and Jeong-o, and Jin-seo had come up with the idea.

Ji-heon’s expression stiffened as he faced Jin-seo. He wondered if Jin-seo would reveal the plan for today.

But Jin-seo was quick-witted and very understanding.

Her elongated lips held significant meaning, but Jin-seo didn’t change the subject.

“It’s nice to see you here, Ji-heon.”

“Yes. Hello. Thanks to you, I was able to deliver the gift well.”

As Ji-heon greeted, Jin-seo turned to Jeong-o.

“I heard all three of you—Do-bin’s dad, Ji-heon, and Jeong-o—work at the same company. What a coincidence!”

With Jin-seo emphasizing “coincidence,” Jeong-o’s cheeks flushed for no reason.

Jeong-o conveyed the plan she had thought about since morning.

“It must have been tough for you for a while. If you have time today, would you like to come to our house? I wanted to invite Do-bin over. I feel very sorry for all the help I’ve received until now.”

“Oh no, it’s nothing. Really. I don’t feel burdened at all when seeing Yena.”

Jin-seo waved her hand dismissively.

“I’d love to visit Yena’s house, but my parents are visiting from the countryside today.”

“Ah… you must be busy.”

“I’m not that busy. I’m pregnant, so for some reason, I want to eat something other than the food I usually make. I’m going to pick up Do-bin now; do you want to come along?”

“Yes, yes. That sounds good.”

Jeong-o followed Jin-seo as she left.

Ji-heon was left alone once again. Fortunately, this time the wait was not long. Shortly after, Jeong-o, Yena, Jin-seo, and Do-bin appeared, holding hands.

Jin-seo cautiously asked Ji-heon, who was waiting.

“I think we should leave first… Ji-heon, can you take them home?”

“Of course.”

Ji-heon’s answer came easily. Jin-seo smiled broadly, just like before.

“Yes. Well, we’ll be going first. Thank you for taking care of Do-bin today, Yena’s mom.”

“No problem. Be careful going back.”

After Jeong-o’s farewell, Do-bin cheerfully waved goodbye.

“Yena, goodbye! See you tomorrow!”

“Okay! Goodbye!”

After Jin-seo and Do-bin left, only Jeong-o, Ji-heon, and Yena remained.

As she faced Ji-heon with Yena, Jeong-o felt nervous once again. The swelling emotions were blocking her thoughts. She had never felt this jittery even during competitive presentations.

“Director, we’ll just go. It’s within walking distance.”

“I’ll give you a ride. Let’s go together.”

Ji-heon held Yena’s hand, afraid Jeong-o might refuse again.

“Yena, let’s go.”

It seemed better to get the child moving. Yena took Ji-heon’s hand and looked up at him, asking.

“Are you the director?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you’re the director who gave my mom the cookies?”

Ji-heon felt pleased at Yena’s recognition.

“Right. You remember.”

“Yes. I took some home.”

But Yena had a different purpose in mind. This time she asked Jeong-o.

“Mom, is that the director who made you work overtime?”

“Uh, that’s…”

“Then is he the director who made you work overtime on my birthday?”

The child was frighteningly sharp.

“Uncle, did you make my mom work overtime on May 27?”

Yena stopped in her tracks and questioned Ji-heon.

No longer could she see the innocent smile of the child.

In an instant, Ji-heon’s heart sank.

After making Jeong-o work overtime the day before, that was May 28.

That day, Jeong-o had said something.

“No matter what you give me, I will not trade it for my all.”

Ah, I see now.

It was Yena. Yena was Jeong-o’s everything.

Ji-heon finally understood why Jeong-o had said those words.

Yena, who had cleaned up all affection, lifted her chin defiantly and asked.

“Why did you do that?”

Ji-heon was left frozen, unable to move. A chill ran down his spine.

Ch59 - Because of You, a Fun Story

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Children’s Day, Christmas, and Birthdays.

For children, these days are the most special of the year among 365 days. Among them, a birthday is certainly the most important.

However, to think that this uncle ruined my birthday.

Yena felt an indescribable sense of betrayal as she opened her eyes wide.

“Mom. Change your job.”

Ji-hun felt as if he were suffocating.

I didn’t know! I really didn’t know!

But recalling that day, he had no words to say.

It wasn’t Jung-oh’s fault that she had to work overtime that day; it was the scheme of Deputy Manager Jo. Moreover, Jung-oh had pleaded with Ji-hun multiple times that day.

But when Ji-hun asked her why she wanted to go home early, she didn’t answer. Since she had hidden the existence of their child, she naturally couldn’t respond.

Ji-hun was consumed by unnecessary jealousy and held her back.

Why can’t humans turn back time? If only he could go back to that day and tell her to go home immediately to celebrate their daughter’s birthday.

Ji-hun looked at Jung-oh with an anxious heart. Jung-oh was smiling comfortably as if everything was fine.

Yena was frowning, while her mother was smiling gently, making the situation even more complicated. The two women seemed to be weighing him on a chopping board, deciding how to cook him—this way or that.

Ji-hun couldn't say anything directly and sent a desperate look to Jung-oh, signaling for her to help him. Reading his eyes, Jung-oh persuaded Yena.

"Yena, Mom can't quit her job right now. I need to earn money too."

"Then change jobs before my next birthday."

However, Yena's stubbornness was unparalleled.

"Is that so?"

Jung-oh said with a smile to Ji-hun.

It seemed she had no intention of persuading Yena any further. Ji-hun felt her smile was cruel.

My heart is racing.

How did it come to this? I never expected to encounter the resistance of that daughter.

"Yena, wait here. Uncle will go get the car."

"Mom, let's just walk."

Ignoring Ji-hun's words, Yena tightly grasped her mother's hand and spoke. Unable to stop Yena, Ji-hun left the car in the parking lot and followed Yena.

"Yena, I made a mistake."

"Liar. You'll do it again."

“No, I won’t. I promise I won’t.”

“Then will you make sure our mom doesn’t have to work overtime?”

“…At least I won’t make her do it. If something happens to Yena, I’ll tell her to go right away.”

“……”

“……Yena, do you want to play Go with me?”

Yena tightly shut her mouth and turned her head away from Ji-hun.

Advertisements

Children are more difficult than Ijeong-oh. I’ve never had such a long conversation with an angry child, nor have I ever tried to calm one down.

This time, Jung-oh stepped in.

“Yena, Uncle even bought you a present.”

But Yena glared at her mother, ready to return the koala doll hidden in her bag.

Yena’s expression was so serious that Jung-oh swallowed hard.

This level of stubbornness must come from Ji-hun’s genes, right?

Jung-oh quickly changed her approach to calm Yena.

“Uncle didn’t know. If he had known, he would have sent your mom home early. Can’t our Yena understand that? Okay?”

“But Yena only has one seventh birthday.”

Tears welled up in Yena’s eyes.

“Why does Mom only side with Uncle? Mom’s daughter isn’t Uncle; it’s Yena. Why is it only Yena who gets scolded?”

Waaaah!

Overwhelmed with sorrow, Yena started crying again.

Both Jung-oh and Ji-hun were at a loss. Ji-hun stood frozen, unsure of what to do, while Jung-oh reached out to hug Yena.

Even though he’s said to be a genius at Go, at times like this, he’s just a seven-year-old child.

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As his father-in-law and mother-in-law came to visit, Seung-kyu left work early and returned home.

As he opened the front door, Dobin ran out first and hugged Seung-kyu.

“Daddy!”

Yesterday, Dobin was so angry that he seemed to cut ties with his father, yet today his face was completely brightened.

“Did Dobin do well in Go?”

“Yeah!”

“What did you learn today?”

“Go!”

Right. One can’t expect much from a seven-year-old. As long as he’s healthy, that’s all that matters.

A moment later, Jin-seo came out of the kitchen. The house was quieter than expected, so Seung-kyu asked.

“Where are your parents?”

“They went to buy toys with Doyoon.”

Seung-kyu could imagine how much Doyoon had whined to get a toy from his grandparents, and he let out a long sigh. Jin-seo’s expression was still bright.

Jin-seo followed Seung-kyu, who was heading to change clothes. Her face was filled with curiosity.

Seung-kyu figured he understood why Jin-seo looked so happy and opened the conversation.

“You must have seen Ji-hun and Ijeong-oh.”

“Yeah. I saw them. But they’re weird together.”

“Weird? How so?”

“They fit too well together. It’s strange.”

The wife had already sent two people to the wedding venue. Seung-kyu chuckled at Jin-seo’s radiant smile.

“What does it matter if they look good together? Ye-na doesn’t like him.”

“Huh? I think Ye-na likes Ji-heon, though?”

“After he left, Ye-na said she wouldn’t ever see Ji-heon again.”

Seung-kyu shared the latest update. Jin-seo’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Why? What happened?”

“Ji-heon made Assistant Lee Jeong-o work late one day.”

“That’s not unusual.”

“That day was Ye-na’s birthday.”

“Ahhh!”

Jin-seo gasped and clapped her hands. She vividly remembered that day.

“That makes sense. Ye-na cried a lot that day because her mom didn’t come.”

Hearing this made Jin-seo feel sorry for Ji-heon.

“Seriously, why did Ji-heon do that? He should be more careful. You never know how things will turn out or what connections you might make. He should treat people well.”

“Anyway, I’m glad we talked. They can sort it out themselves, and it feels good. It’s surprisingly amusing to see Ji-heon so flustered.”

“See? I told you it was a good idea.”

The couple, who had reconciled in just one day, smiled at each other.

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Ye-na’s eyes were red until she entered Guksun Baekban. Guksun rushed over upon seeing her.

“What’s wrong with our puppy? Did your mom scold you?”

“Grandma.”

Recognizing her, Ye-na ran into her grandmother’s arms with a sorrowful face.

After a few pats from Guksun, Ye-na finally calmed down and began to eat.

After closing the shop and washing the dishes, Jeong-o confided in Guksun about what happened that day.

“When Ye-na visited the Dobin family, there was a man she played Go with.”

“Right. That handsome young man.”

“Yes. That young man is our company’s director.”

“Really?”

Guksun’s face lit up momentarily, impressed with how well she had perceived him.

“But why? Why was Ye-na crying?”

“That director made me work late. Ye-na got upset because I made her work late on her birthday.”

“Oh. So that director is that director?”

Only then did Guksun’s expression darken. She snorted and coldly said, “I thought he was polite and handsome. But now I don’t like him. He’s the one making my daughter suffer.”

Jeong-o glanced at Guksun, feeling a sense of foreboding.

Jeong Ji-heon, what now? Before meeting my mother, you’ve already become the villain.

This is why people need to treat others kindly.

“It was for work, so it couldn’t be helped. Anyway, Mom, our Ye-na is a Go prodigy!”

She quickly changed the subject to defend Ji-heon.

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The next day.

Ji-heon called for Jeong-o as soon as he arrived at work.

“Has Ye-na calmed down?”

“Yep.”

Thinking he was looking for documents related to an overseas business trip, Jeong-o brought several things to Ji-heon’s office. Upon hearing his first words, she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Don’t laugh.”

Ji-heon said seriously.

Last night, Ji-heon couldn’t sleep.

The woman who had been stirring his thoughts every night was Lee Jeong-o, but yesterday it was Lee Ye-na.

Ye-na had burst into tears in the street yesterday, and ultimately told him to go away. Ji-heon had no choice but to turn back; he couldn’t keep making the child cry.

He had inadvertently become a man disliked by the daughter of the woman he liked.

He had envisioned an ideal scene where he would become friends with Ye-na, making Jeong-o unable to move an inch, but instead, he found himself wishing he could go back to before he told Ye-na about his feelings.

Jeong-o spoke nonchalantly, as if she were discussing someone else’s story.

“I guess we can’t meet.”

“Don’t say it like that.”

Ji-heon felt uneasy that Jeong-o might just walk away, so he pulled her further inside and made her sit on the sofa.

“I’ll only sit for five minutes before leaving.”

She smiled, as if granting him five minutes of her time. Ji-heon subconsciously checked the time.

Nothing had ever gone his way until now. Even if things didn’t go as he wished, he had lived believing he could just give up. Life had been that easy, but he never expected to yearn so much for what wasn’t going his way.

Jeong-o felt like the perfect fit for him. No, she stimulated him beyond just being a perfect match. His body reacted to her gaze, voice, gestures, and movements, but she had someone more important than him.

He found it absurd to feel jealous of a little girl who looked just like Jeong-o.

“Does Ye-na still tell you to change jobs?”

Jeong-o nodded silently. Ji-heon let out a deep sigh and slumped back against the sofa.

Jeong-o seemed to find delight in discovering Ji-heon’s cute side.

“Our Ye-na is pretty, isn’t she?”

“She is. I’ve never seen such a pretty child. But….”

“She has quite the stubbornness, doesn’t she? I didn’t pass down the stubbornness to her.”

Jeong-o picked up on his unspoken feelings and added to his statement. Ji-heon narrowed his eyes and gave her a stern look.

“If you’re thinking of talking about that guy, you’d better not.”

That guy. There was only one person Ji-heon called that.

Jeong-o’s ex-boyfriend. Ye-na’s biological father.

Jeong-o hid her empty feelings and continued speaking.

If you regain your memories, then maybe it’ll be another new beginning for you.

You’ll have to face a strong fate.

But still, please.

“No matter where you are, or how, even in a barren land where flowers shouldn’t bloom, pretty flowers can still bloom.”

“…….”

“Even if that guy and I were insignificant to each other, something beautiful can still come out of it.”

Remember this. Our Ye-na is so beautiful.

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit too poetic?”

But contrary to her wishes, he only grumbled.

“And stop calling him ‘that guy.’ Call him ‘that jerk.’ He’s not even worth calling a person.”

He didn’t even want to treat someone whose identity he didn’t know like a human being.

We still have a long way to go, Jeong Ji-heon.

When Jeong-o felt disheartened, Ji-heon began to think differently.

If she had a lot she wanted to talk about, if she couldn’t stand not sharing with someone, then it might not be a bad idea for her to pour everything out to him.

“If you want to talk about that jerk, then don’t hold back, just say some bad things.”

He hoped she would vent it all out and completely forget about that jerk.

With a generous heart, Ji-heon made the request.

She burst out laughing.

But he couldn’t understand why she was laughing.

“That jerk.”

Finally, she accepted his advice and began to use the term “that jerk” instead of “that guy.” It felt like her bubbling anger was easing a bit.

“Now that I think about it, it was kind of perverse of me.”

“Crazy jerk. I knew you’d say that.”

“But don’t say things like that. He’s our Ye-na’s dad.”

“If he’s someone who hasn’t shown up until now, then that’s all I need to say.”

He chuckled.

Why does she keep laughing?

Ji-heon felt a little dizzy from her mix of praise and provocation.

“If that jerk shows up, make sure to contact me right away.”

“Why?”

“Why? I need to take care of him.”

“How will you take care of him?”

“I’ll make sure he never shows up again.”

“…….”

“You can smash anything you see, right?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“I’ll consider it permission.”

“But that guy is strong.”

“I’m stronger.”

Right. Go ahead and fight with him. It should be quite a sight.

He would never suspect that Jeong-o was thinking this.

“Still, I’m grateful. It can’t be helped. He created Ye-na, after all.”

“Other than creating Ye-na, what has that guy done as a father?”

“That’s everything. It’s the most important thing.”

Her calm words filled his heart with a heavy emptiness.

He had filled his heart with one person, yet he felt a void somewhere.

The sorrow of thinking that you are everything to me, but I am just a part of you, that I might end up loving this woman from afar for the rest of my life.

Why am I so helpless against such a harsh woman?

He stepped closer to her and suddenly captured her lovely but annoying lips.

It was a little painful, and a sharp sigh escaped through the gap between them. It felt sweet in his mouth, like swallowing a few spoonfuls of sugar, while his head buzzed.

The desire born from jealousy had a long aftermath, and soon five minutes had passed. No, it had been ten minutes.

“Now I understand a bit.”

He pulled his lips away and looked at her.

“You’re doing this on purpose, right? You knew I would react like this.”

“No. That’s not it.”

She said, her entire face flushed red, her lips glistening.

“That’s not true. I clearly said that if you talk about that guy, I would make you suffer.”

She was confident about that part.

Ch60 - I'll Hold Your Hand

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Eun-bi’s commute was a hellish journey.

Work was no longer fun. She couldn’t stand the team leader who nagged about ideas every day, nor could she endure Jeong Ji-heon, who treated her like she didn’t exist.

Moreover, today was the day Lee Jeong-oh returned from his overseas business trip and vacation.

She felt like she wouldn’t be able to bear watching Ji-heon gaze at Jeong-oh with such admiration.

It was incredibly frustrating and painful to know that her brother Eun-yeop had instructed her to stay out of it, leaving her powerless.

Yesterday, she received a call from Mrs. Jang Young-mi but didn’t answer. She could guess what the call was about, and she couldn’t bear to pick up. If Mrs. Jang asked whether she had really broken up with Ji-heon, she would have to tell the truth, but she couldn’t say those words herself.

Amidst all this annoyance, she spotted the root cause of her troubles: Lee Jeong-oh.

About twenty minutes ago, she had seen him heading toward Ji-heon’s office, and now he had finally appeared. Thinking about what the two of them had done in those twenty minutes made her blood boil.

Ji-heon is mine!

Eun-bi chased after Jeong-oh, who was heading to the pantry, and coldly said, “Lee Jeong-oh, do you know? You’re disposable.”

“……”

“Who would take in a single mother with nothing to her name? Someday, when your brother comes to his senses, you’ll be discarded. What will you do then?”

“……”

“I’m really worried about you.”

Her voice, laced with a smile, couldn’t possibly sound like concern. Jeong-oh seemed to understand Eun-bi’s intentions well. In truth, he felt pity for her.

“Eun-bi, is that worry really for me?”

Jeong-oh asked without any change in emotion.

“Disposable? That’s not about you?”

Eun-bi’s eyes widened. Jeong-oh gave a bitter smile and continued.

“Sorry, but I’m not talking about your relationship with Director Jeong. I’m talking about your work.”

“……”

“Are you even useful to the company? Since joining, I haven’t seen you produce anything worthwhile. You have no ideas.”

“……”

“If you keep this up, I, your assistant, will take your position. What are you going to do if the company discards you?”

Seeing Eun-bi’s facial muscles twitch, Jeong-oh left the pantry first.

It was a stinging criticism, but it was also wrapped in a humanistic sentiment. He hoped that Eun-bi would focus more on her work rather than wasting her time fixated on someone who meant nothing to her.

Eventually, Eun-bi would have to come to that realization. Even if she was disappointed in people, work could sustain her. But perhaps Cha Eun-bi would never realize that.

Jeong-oh returned to his seat, feeling a sense of emptiness as if he had been talking to a brick wall.

“Assistant! I missed you!”

Upon returning to the team, Gi-hoon greeted Jeong-oh with sparkling eyes.

“Gi-hoon, how have you been? Any difficulties?”

“Things have been fairly peaceful. How about you? How was the air in Australia? You’ve lived in Melbourne before, right? Did old memories come flooding back?”

“Yeah. It hasn’t changed much. The air was nice, and everything was good.”

“But you must have had a tough time. I heard you even met with the director.”

Gi-hoon leaned in closer to Jeong-oh and said cautiously.

“Lee Jeong-oh.”

At that moment, Ji-heon’s voice, like that of a grim reaper, echoed from a distance.

Jeong-oh couldn’t understand how Ji-heon seemed to know when to call him at moments like this.

Gi-hoon also returned to his seat, clearing his throat, and Jeong-oh stood up to look at Ji-heon.

Ji-heon approached from the end of the hallway and said, “Bring the overseas trip report to me by today.”

Jeong-oh glared at Ji-heon with all his might as he brushed past him toward the meeting room.

‘Ugh. Just looking at him is painful.’

After giving up on silent rebellion in just thirty seconds, Jeong-oh placed his hands on the PC keyboard and thought he needed to take the next step quickly.

‘I need to meet a lawyer as soon as possible.’

With the preparation for the presentation, Mi-ran’s hospitalization, and the overseas trip, Jeong-oh hadn’t had time to look for a lawyer. Finally, he took a deep breath and began searching.

There weren’t many law firms specializing in disputes involving single mothers, but there were a few noticeable ones.

The law firms had posted relevant materials on their blogs or websites, and Jeong-oh began to take note.

‘Oh, they have a similar story to mine?’

One law firm that introduced a case similar to his caught his eye. The blog post had the latest information. It was a large law firm, not too expensive in terms of fees, and most importantly, they offered free consultations, which was appealing.

Jeong-oh made an appointment for a consultation with the law firm he found and started working.

After being away for three days, there was a lot to do, so it took a considerable amount of time to finish the overseas trip report. Additionally, in the afternoon, Jeong-oh received a call from Jin-seo, which made him anxious.

Hastily, Jeong-oh returned to Ji-heon’s office with the overseas trip report, placing it on Ji-heon’s desk and saying, “I’m sorry for the delay. I was busy, Director.”

“If you’re that busy, just say you’ll do it tomorrow,” Ji-heon said, casually flipping through the report. Jeong-oh felt a surge of frustration.

Jeong Ji-heon, you little brat!

Do you think I’m just going to take this? I’ll make you suffer too.

“Now that I think about it, there was another good point about that guy.”

Just as expected, Ji-heon’s hand twitched as he was examining the report.

“He looked really cool when he was cooking. He made delicious food too.”

Ji-heon slowly raised his head to look at her as he set down the report. For a moment, Jeong-oh felt intimidated by Ji-heon’s sharp gaze, but she bravely continued.

“He looked super cool when he was chopping. Especially when he flipped things in the frying pan—it was amazing.”

“……”

“When you make jeon (Korean pancakes), you have to flip them, right? You do it like this, like this. Do you know how to flip them with one hand? You use a snap like this. Whoosh.”

Jeong-oh even demonstrated the flipping pose, trying to provoke him.

And she finished with a nostalgic look in her eyes.

“He looked really cool back then.”

Ji-heon pressed his lips together tightly, trying not to show any emotion.

Could there be another woman who talks so boldly about her ex in front of her current boyfriend?

Wait, am I even her current boyfriend? She had never once said that.

“Lee Jeong-oh, I want to ask you something.”

“Yes, please go ahead.”

“What are we to each other?”

“……”

“Can I think of you as my boyfriend?”

“……”

“Or are we just a physical relationship?”

“Just allowing the body… No, I didn’t even allow that.”

“Fine, don’t say it.”

Ji-heon turned his head, worried that she might try to evade the topic.

“I can’t even work because of Lee Jung-oh’s push and pull.”

“Right. I didn’t mean to play hard to get, but I’m sorry for making it hard for you to work. Well then, I’ll take my leave.”

Jung-oh shrugged and took a step back, causing Ji-heon to feel anxious again. What else could this be if not a game of push and pull?

“Why are you leaving so quickly again?”

“Actually, I need to step out for a bit.”

“Is something going on?”

“Do-bin seems to have an upset stomach and couldn’t go to his academy. There’s no one to take Ye-na home after class.”

Ye-na. If it’s about Ye-na, he couldn’t ignore it.

“Let’s go together. I’ll give you a ride.”

Ji-heon also got up from his seat.

Using the excuse of stepping out briefly, he drove Jung-oh to Ye-na’s academy. For some reason, meeting Ye-na made him just as nervous as meeting Jung-oh.

“What does Ye-na like?”

As they got closer to the academy, Ji-heon asked.

“Don’t you have a rough idea? She likes Go, enjoys toys that kids her age like, loves comedy shows, and wordplay, things like that.”

“What about food?”

“She loves ice cream the most. I don’t let her eat too much, though. She also likes tteokbokki and tonkatsu.”

Ji-heon mentally noted everything Jung-oh mentioned.

If he couldn’t win over the child, he would lose Jung-oh too.

On the other hand, getting closer to the child would likely help Jung-oh open up more.

He had a vague feeling that he would continue to be by this woman’s side.

He didn’t say what he wanted to say now, as not enough time had passed.

As time goes by, the seasons change, he visits her mother, and tidies up any potential gossip that might arise. He gradually steps through the stages, convinced that they would one day live together.

So he wished time would flow a bit faster.

Though his heart was full, there were many things he couldn’t do because time wasn’t piling up.

Ji-heon realized he had never thought about life or the future until now.

It was only after meeting Lee Jung-oh that he felt, “I’m truly living my life.”

Soon, Jung-oh returned from the academy with Ye-na. The mother and daughter, hands tightly held, looked lovely from a distance and up close.

The woman, who was particularly aloof and picky in front of him, had a completely softened expression in front of the child.

He didn’t feel much jealousy at the gaze she directed toward the child, unlike the bubbling feelings he had when looking at Song Ki-hoon and Lee Jung-oh’s relationship.

“Mom, Do-bin isn’t here today.”

“Yeah. Do-bin has an upset stomach.”

The child, who had been pouting her lips toward her mother like a goldfish, turned her head and stiffened her expression when she saw Ji-heon.

Here, too, was another woman who was particularly aloof and picky in front of Jung Ji-heon.

“Uncle is here again?”

“Ye-na, what do you mean by ‘uncle is here again’? You should greet him properly by saying hello.”

Jung-oh admonished Ye-na for her sharp response.

Ye-na, who had been pouting her lips for a moment, reluctantly bowed her head with a displeased look.

“Hello, Uncle…”

“Yeah. Hello, Ye-na.”

As Ji-heon greeted her and extended his hand, Ye-na stared at his hand intently.

He could understand that wary gaze.

Perhaps it reminded him of when she calmly said, “I don’t have a dad,” on the day he first met the child.

Seeing the child made his heart feel a prick of discomfort.

I want to be friends with you, but I don’t really know how either. Still, I’m trying. You are the person that Jung-oh loves the most.

In that moment, almost miraculously, the child slowly began to move her hand.

Thump, thump.

Finally, a small hand, like a maple leaf, was placed on top of Ji-heon’s large hand.

A strange tickling sensation arose in his chest as if the leaves were swaying in the breeze.

He felt cautious as if the leaf might crumble. He couldn’t grip too tightly for fear of hurting her, nor could he hold lightly for fear of her slipping away.

In that tension, a sudden dizziness washed over him.

I’ll hold your hand.

“Why are you acting like that, Uncle?”

When Ji-heon suddenly stopped walking, Ye-na looked up and asked.

Due to the sudden headache, Ji-heon unintentionally furrowed his brow and hurriedly shook his head.

“Nothing. It’s nothing.”

Jung-oh also looked at Ji-heon with a puzzled expression.

The three of them walked toward the parking lot. On the way to the parking lot, there was a bicycle storage area. Seeing an older child ride away on a bike stored there, Ye-na asked.

“Uncle, can you ride a bike well?”

“Of course.”

Ji-heon replied cheerfully, pleased that the child showed interest.

“Should I teach you how to ride a bike? I used to….”

Screech—

“Ah!”

A sharp headache surged from his ears to the back of his head and squeezed his forehead as if it were being pressed.

The scenery in front of him faded like a curtain being drawn back, and unfamiliar fragments of thought unfolded before him.

To a baby who will be born someday.

I’ll let you be the first to step on the snow that falls overnight.

I’ll let you see the stars rise.

I’ll teach you how to ride a bike.

I’ll hold your hand.

“Jung Ji-heon.”

As he stopped in his tracks, holding his head with one hand, Ji-heon blinked.

Jung-oh was looking at him with a worried expression. Below her, he could see the child, who resembled Lee Jung-oh, staring at him with wide eyes.

Ji-heon couldn’t say a word.

For a brief moment, he felt as if he had traveled back to a moment in the past.

It felt like a letter filled with deep feelings sent from a certain point in the past by Jung Ji-heon to someone.

…What is this memory?

Ch61 - That Person Must Have Been Waiting All Along

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Ji-heon drove silently. He stumbled slightly, as if feeling dizzy, but quickly returned to being his usual self.

However, Jung-oh was worried about him the entire way to the restaurant.

“It’s not just about taking Ye-na home; I think he should go to the hospital.”

Still, the distance from the academy to the restaurant wasn’t too far. Ji-heon’s car soon arrived at the restaurant.

Guk-soon, who was preparing for the dinner service, spotted Jung-oh and Ye-na with other customers and hurried out of the kitchen. However, when she saw that Ji-heon was with them, she hesitated.

Ji-heon greeted her first.

“Hello, ma’am. How have you been?”

“Oh, yes. I see… It’s been a while…”

Guk-soon returned the greeting, her heart wavering at his good looks, but knowing he was the troublesome director who made her daughter work overtime and made her granddaughter cry, she couldn’t greet him warmly.

Still, she couldn’t help but be respectful since he was her daughter’s superior.

“Uh… Why are you together?”

The awkward Guk-soon turned to Jung-oh and asked.

“The director came to apologize to Ye-na and joined us today.”

Only after Jung-oh replied in a cheerful voice did Guk-soon’s lips curve into a relieved smile.

“Oh my, thank you so much, thank you…”

Of course, I have a good eye for people.

“You’ve come all the way here, so it would be nice if you could have a meal before leaving.”

“No, Mom. The director is busy and needs to go back to the office right away.”

Before Ji-heon could say anything, Jung-oh answered for him. Although Ji-heon felt a bit disappointed, he had to follow Jung-oh’s wishes.

“Yes. I just stopped by on my way and will come to greet you again when I have the chance.”

“Oh dear, that’s right. Yes…”

In this brief encounter, Guk-soon sensed a strange atmosphere. The director, who was Jung-oh’s boss, was not just any director; he felt special toward Jung-oh.

On the way back to the office, Jung-oh cautiously asked Ji-heon, who was once again at the wheel.

“Are you not thinking about going to the hospital?”

“Why would I go to the hospital? Is someone sick?”

“No, I just thought you seemed to have a headache earlier.”

Ji-heon, who had been looking straight ahead, turned his head briefly toward Jung-oh. He was grateful for her concern, but he couldn’t bring himself to share what had happened to him.

With a poker face, he asked, “You said that back then, didn’t you? At the hotel.”

“Yeah?”

“I said I hoped to find my memories.”

“…That’s right.”

“Do you still feel that way?”

“…”

“I hope I find my memories?”

“Of course.”

Her cool demeanor remained unchanged, making Ji-heon feel a bit disappointed by her answer.

A brief silence followed.

“Seven years ago, when I lost my memories, I might have had someone I liked.”

He cautiously brought up the possibility, anxious that she might be surprised.

As expected, her voice wavered.

“Then you should meet that person.”

But her response was still cool.

Was it that her outside didn’t match her inside? Was she giving a moral textbook answer while suffering internally?

Ji-heon honestly complained.

“To me, the present is what matters!”

“Still, you should meet them.”

“…”

“That person might have been waiting all this time.”

“But they didn’t contact me all this time.”

“They might not have been able to contact you.”

“……”

“For example… maybe someone in your family deliberately blocked them…”

Her voice, hypothesizing possibilities, lacked confidence. It seemed she was gauging his reaction.

Yet she quickly regained her composure and said, “Let’s meet first. No, let’s try to remember something. If you recall anyone, let’s meet and talk about it. We should discuss the circumstances, catch up on what’s happened, and if there’s something you’ve missed, you need to apologize too.”

It seemed she was getting more immersed in the topic she had brought up. Ji-heon, who had stopped the car at a traffic light, turned to look at Jung-oh.

“That person must have been waiting all along at the spot where you left.”

A woman who was more seriously invested in what I had experienced than I was.

I couldn’t read her true feelings at all.

“Do you understand?”

Finally, she smiled brightly, urging him for a response. The tremor in her voice had vanished.

“What if I meet that person, and they don’t let me go? Is it okay if I can’t come back to you, Lee Jung-oh?”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t just smile; say something.”

“……”

“Are you okay with that?”

I wondered what kind of person I am in your life.

I can’t be as important as Ye-na or your mother, but can I take the next spot?

I wanted to catch even a glimpse of her heart.

“I can assure you that whoever it is, I’ll probably win.”

Her answer was neither an affirmation nor a denial, but it was a declaration of her confidence in winning.

Do you know that I will definitely return?

Of course, this is Lee Jung-oh. Confident, bold, and honest Lee Jung-oh.

While her response wasn’t a clear yes or no, he felt somewhat comforted.

“Let’s try to remember and talk it out. Don’t just sip on kimchi soup, Ji-heon.”

Ji-heon probably didn’t realize how desperate she was.

To him, she might seem like a woman suffering from a severe case of coolness, but in reality, Jung-oh's heart had been racing the whole time.

If there's even a spark of hope left, I never want to give up.

"I'm so curious about your life seven years ago. So, so, so, so much."

In moments of persuading him, her voice kept catching in her throat.

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After finishing his work and leaving the office, Ji-heon stopped by a mart. He suddenly felt the urge to cook.

He already had a menu in mind: pancakes.

He would make delicious pancakes.

He had never tried to cook something for himself before.

He naturally had no appetite and lived in a luxury apartment with hotel-style meal service, so he never felt the need to cook. As a result, his kitchen lacked even the most basic cooking utensils.

Trying to cook, he realized he needed a lot of things: knives, cutting boards, frying pans, and various ingredients… To make just one pancake, he had to spend nearly 300,000 won on ingredients.

Carrying a bundle of ingredients, he entered his home.

After putting everything down in the kitchen, he sat there for a while with a blank mind.

But recalling Jung-oh's words rekindled his determination.

I had to be a better person than Lee Jung-oh's ex-boyfriend.

He prepared the ingredients according to the instructions of the chef in the video.

He washed the ingredients, placed them on the cutting board, and chopped the zucchini like a chef.

“When you chop like this, it looks so cool. Especially when flipping it in the frying pan, it’s really impressive.”

It felt like Jung-oh’s voice from his memories was louder than the video he was referencing.

What’s the big deal?

While cutting the zucchini in thick slices, Ji-heon wanted to chop it neatly like the chef in the video. After watching the video closely three times, he firmly set himself up and struck a pose.

Chop, chop, chop, chop, chop.

Having never held a knife before, he was surprisingly good at cutting the zucchini evenly and finely.

Am I actually talented at chopping?

Ji-heon’s father was a giant in the food industry, having grown a company from a snack factory into a large corporation. Perhaps he had inherited his father’s instincts. However, he had never seen his father cook.

Setting aside the momentary doubt, he continued with the cooking. It was a simple dish: mix pancake flour, add the sliced ingredients, pour cooking oil into the frying pan, and fry it.

While it seemed simple in the video, his surroundings were becoming increasingly messy. Still, when he ladled the mixture into the hot frying pan, the sound of the ingredients sizzling in the oil sounded quite convincing.

Now it was time to flip the pancake.

“When you fry pancakes, you need to flip them. Like this, this way. Do you know how to flip with one hand? You use the wrist snap. Like this.

Whoosh.”

Once again, Jung-oh’s voice from his memory surfaced first. The image of her demonstrating how to flip the pancake was replayed in his mind.

Gripping the handle of the frying pan tightly, Ji-heon lifted it and shook it back and forth to check if the bottom was evenly cooked. Then, using his wrist snap…

Whoosh.

Smack!

Ji-heon’s eyes widened.

The pancake, perfectly cooked on the bottom, had risen effortlessly.

So easily.

He let out a light laugh, “See? I can do it too.”

That guy, Lee Jung-oh’s ex-boyfriend, seemed pathetic.

What’s so special about it?

Then he thought, “Wait, does it really work?”

Unsure of himself, Ji-heon put in a little more effort.

Whoosh! *Smack!*

The properly cooked pancake flipped even more smoothly than before.

It works.

Am I actually a culinary genius?

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The next day.

During work hours, Seung-kyu took a moment to visit Ji-heon’s office. He had been eager to hear the updated information.

“Hey, are you busy?”

“No, come in.”

Ji-heon welcomed Seung-kyu warmly, as he had something to say as well.

Ji-heon placed a tablet PC on the desk in front of Seung-kyu. On the screen was an image of a children’s bicycle.

“What’s with the bicycle?”

“Do-bin doesn’t have a bike, right? I want to buy him one.”

“I appreciate it, but why all of a sudden?”

“About seven years ago.”

Ji-heon calmly shared the conclusion from the previous day.

“I think I liked you more than I realized. I might have wanted to be your son’s godfather.”

“Godfather? What are you talking about?”

Seung-kyu frowned, puzzled.

“It felt like some of my lost memories were returning.”

“Oh? What kind of memories?”

“I remember wanting to be good to a child who was going to be born, wanting to show him the stars, and teach him how to ride a bike. I remembered feelings like that.”

Seung-kyu tilted his head at Ji-heon’s sudden memory.

It was clearly in Korean, but it felt like hearing a foreign language.

A child who was going to be born? Wanting to be good to that child?

“Is this a proper memory? I think you might be mistaken.”

Ji-heon’s faint smile suddenly disappeared.

“Do-bin was born in August. I found out my wife was pregnant in January the following year. It seems like you’re misremembering events that happened after your accident as if they were before.”

“……”

“Or is it another memory? Think a bit harder.”

Ji-heon felt a throbbing pain in his head again. He didn’t want to revisit this conversation anymore.

Noticing Ji-heon’s serious expression, Seung-kyu offered advice.

“Ji-heon, if you really want to recover your memories, if you have that determination, how about trying hypnosis therapy?”

“……”

“Should I look into it?”

At Seung-kyu’s suggestion, Ji-heon’s heart fluttered.

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After leaving work early, Ji-heon visited his family home.

His mother, Mrs. Jang Young-mi, was thrilled to see her son visit after a long time. But Ji-heon’s attention was elsewhere. He headed to the storage room where he kept his old belongings.

Toys he used to play with, albums, and certificates from school days. There were many things, but the item Ji-heon was searching for wasn't there.

Mrs. Jang approached and asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for something."

"What are you looking for?"

"My old cellphone."

"Which old cellphone?"

"The one I was using at the time of the accident seven years ago. Do you know where it is?"

"…… Why?"

"I think there might be something I forgot to check. I have the phone from eleven years ago here, but the one from seven years ago is missing."

"I threw that away a long time ago… It was all broken and damaged."

"What about the data on it?"

"I transferred everything to a new phone. Why are you asking when you already know?"

He had suspected that would be the answer. Ji-heon gave up searching and stood up.

"Mom, you know I went to Australia after I got back from the army, right?"

"…… Yes, I remember."

"Why don't I have any photos from that trip?"

Ji-heon posed the question, closely observing Mrs. Jang's expression.

“I have photos from other trips, but nothing from that time. Why is that?”

He noticed her trembling eyes and her slightly pale complexion.

Ji-heon recalled Jung-oh’s words from the previous day.

“They might not have been able to contact you… For example… someone in your family might have deliberately blocked them…”

He began to think that what he had believed for so long might not be true.

Like Chae Eun-bi, there could be someone very close to him who had been deceiving him for a long time.

And someone who wrapped the feelings of controlling her son in the guise of love.

“Mom, is there something you’re hiding from me?”

He started to think that he had trusted her love too much.

Ch62 - Seven Years Ago, November 2nd

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“…What does your mom hide from you? That kind of talk is hurtful, son.”

Mrs. Jang glanced at Ji-heon, speaking lightly to deflect his question.

Whenever there was an unfavorable mention, his mother would add that she felt hurt.

Ji-heon decided that there was no need to continue the conversation.

The way back home from his family’s house felt long and distant.

He pulled over in a dark spot and fell deep into thought.

When he was younger, his mother had interfered in his friendships. After he caused a ruckus back then, his mother contacted the friend’s mother and completely ruined their relationship.

Since then, Ji-heon had been careful about his friendships. He tried not to make friends that his mother wouldn’t approve of, and he firmly maintained the boundaries among friends.

As a result, he had few friends.

By not engaging in behaviors that would get him in trouble with his mother, he believed her obsession had naturally faded.

Or so he thought.

He never considered that, just as he could deceive his mother, she could easily deceive him as well.

But then, how could he ever find out?

It had already been seven years since that incident.

It would be hard for an ordinary person to remember something from seven years ago.

Ji-heon absentmindedly tapped on his phone screen and called Jung-o.

“Hello?”

Jung-o answered immediately.

He could hear a muffled voice on the other end that sounded like Ye-na.

“Are you with Ye-na? Should we talk later?”

“No, it’s fine.”

Just as Ji-heon was about to hang up out of courtesy, Jung-o unexpectedly held him back. After a moment, Ye-na’s voice faded, and the surroundings grew quiet; it seemed Jung-o had moved to another room to avoid disturbing her.

“Actually, you know that koala stuffed animal you gave me? Ye-na is throwing a fit for me to make a pouch for it.”

“A pouch?”

“She said the baby kangaroo is warm because it’s in the mother’s pouch, but the baby koala is just being carried around and gets cold. So she wants me to make a pouch for it.”

Ji-heon smiled with his eyes closed at the sensitivity of the child.

He could easily imagine the scene of Ye-na whining to Jung-o. Even in his imagination, the child was incredibly cute and adorable. The thought that Jung-o's childhood wasn't so different from this crossed his mind, and he felt an urge to run over and check right away.

"Ye-na's grandmother used to carry her a lot in a pouch when she was little."

A grandmother, a mother, and a child. A household of single mothers spanning two generations.

To others, it might seem like a meager and unfortunate collection of family members, but upon reflection, there was nothing inferior about it compared to his own family.

He hardly spoke to his father except about work, and he rarely saw his half-brother, meeting only a few times a year.

As for his relationship with his mother… it was a bond that hid bondage and suspicion behind the words "I love you," merely looking at its surface.

On the outside, his family appeared bountiful and perfect, but it was, in reality, very flimsy and superficial.

What Ji-heon lacked in his family, Jung-o possessed.

"Oh, why did you contact me?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Huh. If that's the case, then why are you being so vague? It makes me anxious."

"Are you anxious about my voice?"

"Of course! How could I not be nervous that you might suddenly call me to work?"

For a moment, he felt excited but was soon deflated.

His desire not to be called “sir” by her clashed with the realization that if he hadn’t been, she wouldn’t have treated his call with such importance.

In any case, he needed to become someone more personal and significant to her.

“By the way, I’ve been cooking a bit.”

Hoping to hold onto this voice a little longer, Ji-heon thought about what to say and ended up throwing out a random comment.

“Yesterday, while cooking for fun, I tried flipping a pancake, and I did well!”

“Wow! Really?”

He had thought she would dismiss it lightly, but surprisingly, her voice sounded cheerful and sincere. Ji-heon felt a little proud.

“When will you let me see you do it?”

“Yes!”

“…”

“Please show me.”

He had expected her to reject the offer outright, but unexpectedly, she answered affirmatively.

“When can you come to our house?”

“Whenever Ye-na is asleep?”

Huh.

He felt as though he had been hit hard by her boldness.

He covered his mouth with his hand to stifle his laughter.

“Does that mean you can do it today?”

The world on the other end of the phone fell silent.

“…I just thought that when Ye-na wakes up, it wouldn’t work out. She always wakes up if I’m not around.”

…Well, that makes sense.

“Ah, how about you bring the pancake and frying pan to the office? I’ll sneak in quietly to see if you can really flip it well.”

“Forget it.”

Forget it, Jung-o.

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“Not happening.”

His voice was sulky from disappointment, making Jung-o laugh.

Her face turned slightly red.

She genuinely just wanted to see him flip pancakes with her own eyes. But it seemed this crafty man had misinterpreted her words.

It’s my fault. I showed a gap to this opportunist.

As Jung-o finished the call, she reflected on her thoughts.

“I have to go because Ye-na is calling. Have a happy Friday! And enjoy your cooking hobby.”

After leaving her encouragement, Jung-o let out a long sigh and went out into the living room. It had been a delightful call.

It felt like going back to the time seven years ago when they would talk all night without any particular reason.

“What’s making you so happy all by yourself?”

Kuk-soon, who was making a pouch for Ye-na, asked as she saw Jung-o smiling.

“It’s nothing. I just thought of something fun. Oh, Mom, I need to step out for a bit.”

“Where are you going again?”

“I forgot something, so I’m going to the office for a bit. It’ll only take an hour or two. Just go to bed first.”

“Go tomorrow. It’s late.”

“If I get caught tomorrow, it’ll be a hassle. It’s better to go quickly today.”

“Be careful.”

Waving her hand to reassure the worried Kuk-soon, Jung-o left the house.

He had received a call from the law firm. The lawyer seemed quite busy, so they scheduled a late-night consultation. Still, it was a relief to have an appointment set without having to wait until next week.

When he opened the front door after going down to the first floor, he spotted a familiar face. It was Officer Kwon Bae-il from next door.

“Hello, Officer!”

“Oh, hello! How have you been?”

At his awkward greeting, Jung-o smiled gently.

Today, Bae-il was dressed in a suit instead of his usual police uniform. He looked like he was heading out for a formal meeting.

With his tall stature and slender face, the outfit suited him well.

“Where are you going? It’s the first time I’m seeing you in a suit. You look great today.”

“Thank you.”

However, there was a somewhat odd detail in his polished suit. A piece of yellow masking tape was stuck to the back of his hand.

“By the way, Officer, you’ve got something on your hand.”

“Oh, this?”

Bae-il didn’t seem to have any intention of taking the tape off and shyly held it out for her to see.

“It worked well when you put the tape on my mosquito bite back then…”

“Ah, so you put that on because you got bitten by a mosquito?”

“Yes, it was the only tape I had.”

Hahaha. This guy really doesn’t know how to make the most of his good looks.

PT is over, and I don’t carry tape around anymore; I want to buy him some clear tape…

“I’m glad it worked.”

Jeong-oh politely smiled, not wanting to say that it was far from effective.

“Lee Jeong-oh, you seem to be in better spirits than before.”

“Is that so?”

“It looks that way. Is there any sign of resolution with the long-unsolved case?”

“I’m not sure about that yet.”

“Either way, you look much better. Keep your chin up, and if you ever need help, don’t hesitate to call the police.”

“Yes, thank you.”

With Baeil’s encouragement, Jeong-oh felt a bit more energized.

She took a taxi to the law firm. It was located about halfway between her office and home. She was surprised to learn that this large law firm, which ranked among the top ten in the country, also handled individual consultations, thinking they only dealt with companies.

Following the office staff’s guidance, Jeong-oh entered the building.

At 9 PM, the hour was quite late, and the staff looked tired.

“Please wait a moment. The attorney will be with you shortly.”

“Okay.”

After standing at the desk for about three minutes, footsteps echoed closer.

“Lee Jeong-oh?”

A man called her name.

“Yes.”

“Hello. I’m the attorney in charge of your consultation today… Ha Jin-cheol.”

Did the staff member and the attorney just exchange strange looks? Jeong-oh hesitated for a moment before greeting him. She had definitely checked Ha Jin-cheol’s face on the law firm’s website, but though he wore glasses, he looked quite different from the photo.

“Hello. I thought you were someone else; your impression is quite different from the photo.”

“I hear that often. They must have edited the photo a lot. Please, this way.”

The attorney turned and walked down a long corridor. His strides were quite brisk.

Jeong-oh hurriedly followed him, passing several personal offices. The names of the attorneys were posted outside the rooms: Kim Jin-wook, Hong Da-kyung, Lee Min-hyeok, Ha Jin-cheol, Chae Eun-yeob…

The name “Chae Eun-yeob” caught Jeong-oh’s attention.

A distant memory flickered through her mind.

“Didn’t Chae Eun-bi come from a family of legal professionals?”

Jeong-oh carefully took out her phone, keeping some distance from the man in front of her. She typed “Attorney Chae Eun-yeob” into the search bar.

The image search filled the screen with the face of the man walking ahead of her—Chae Eun-yeob, not Ha Jin-cheol.

“Please, come in here, Lee Jeong-oh.”

The man opened the door to a corner office and said.

This man is deceiving me.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

After finishing the call with Jeong-oh, Ji-heon remained in the same spot for a long time.

He wanted to bring her to his room as soon as possible, to mark her as his in some way.

“Should I give her a ring?”

He recalled that long ago, Chae Eun-bi had worn a ring that resembled a couple’s ring. He heard it had led to more misunderstandings about their

relationship among the staff.

Should I believe in the binding nature of a ring? If I give it as a gift, will she put it on?

As he mulled over several worries, he returned to the original concern.

The memory from seven years ago. That issue had to be resolved first.

Ji-heon contemplated ways to restore the memories of that long-ago time, under the assumption that his mother might have hidden something.

The call records on his phone would have long passed the carrier’s retention period, so there was no chance of recovery.

What about credit card usage records? Could that reveal anything about the past?

Assuming his mother had arbitrarily canceled the cards he had been using all this time, those records wouldn’t be available either.

Seven years is quite a long time. The information lost to time was too far gone to retrieve.

Letting out a deep sigh, Ji-heon started his car, intending to go home but then decided to stop by a jewelry shop. It was the most famous jewelry shop in Gangnam.

“Welcome!”

“I came to look at women’s rings.”

“Are you looking for a proposal ring, sir?”

“Something like that.”

The staff member who greeted him warmly displayed several pretty rings before him.

They shouldn’t be too extravagant to avoid being burdensome, and since she has a child, they shouldn’t be sharp either.

Wait, if I’m doing this anyway, wouldn’t a more extravagant ring be better?

After much deliberation, he chose a simple ring with a delicate diamond cut. He knew that anything she wore would look beautiful, so there was no need to worry about the design. However, putting it on her would be a significant mission.

“How do I get her size? It might not fit her hand.”

“If you fill out a customer card, we can adjust it later when you bring it back. Would you like me to assist you with that?”

“Yes, please.”

“Could you provide your contact information and name?”

Following the staff member’s instructions, Ji-heon wrote down his contact information and name on the card. When the staff member paused while entering Ji-heon’s records into the computer, he asked,

“Sir, has your phone number changed?”

“It has, but why do you ask?”

“Do you know the last four digits of this number? ○○○○?”

“Yes, that was my old phone number.”

“Could I ask for the full number?”

Ji-heon recited the old phone number. The staff member smiled brightly.

“Your name is still on our records. You visited us seven years ago.”

Ji-heon was momentarily taken aback and looked at the staff member.

“Do you not remember? You bought a ring back then.”

“…When exactly was that seven years ago?”

“It says November 2nd, seven years ago.”

November 2nd, seven years ago.

The day before I had a car accident.

Recalling the pain from that time, his throat felt hot.

Ji-heon tried to hide his trembling voice and requested,

“Could I take a look at those records?”

“You purchased a beautiful proposal ring. Really, you don’t remember? It was our store’s top-tier product at the time.”

The staff member turned the monitor towards Ji-heon to show him the records.

Purchased item, date, credit card company.

A brief snippet of information appeared on the monitor, partially obscured.

November 2nd, seven years ago.

I…

I was going to propose to someone.

Ch63 - It Seems There Was Someone I Loved

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Jeong-o entered the room he was guided to. It was a meeting room with only a table and chairs.

“Please, have a seat.”

“Sure.”

She sat silently in the chair that Chae Eun-yeob suggested and looked at him.

Jeong-o had come to this law firm because of a counseling case he had seen on a blog.

It was a story about a single mother who, without knowing the whereabouts of her child’s father, raised her child alone and finally met him again six years after they had separated. The child’s father turned out to be from a well-known family and was about to marry another woman.

Jeong-o was intrigued by the information that the protagonist of that story had consulted this law firm, and that the dispute had been resolved quite well, prompting him to seek counseling.

‘Could that have been my story? How did they know?’

As that thought crossed his mind, a chill ran down Jeong-o’s spine.

Could the attempted kidnapping of Ye-na, which happened a long time ago, have also been the work of this person?

It seemed that the kidnapper knew who Ye-na was.

However, there was something strange.

‘If I were in their position, I would have first made sure Chae Eun-bi kept quiet.’

Knowing all the facts, why would Chae Eun-bi allow me to blabber about being a single mother in the office?

‘Is he scheming behind my younger sister’s back to handle everything for her successful marriage?’

The thought made him feel even more uneasy. Jeong-o hid his trembling hands under the table.

Chae Eun-yeob, facing him with a business-like smile, asked, “So, you’re a single mom. What brings you here?”

This person is smart and cunning.

I must not fall into his trap.

‘He might have hidden recording devices set up somewhere.’

I cannot show any weaknesses.

So, what would be a way to consult without revealing my vulnerabilities?

“Yes… I’m a working single mother.”

Jeong-o hesitantly opened up.

“Actually, it’s because of a colleague.”

“A colleague?”

“Yes. As I mentioned, I’m a single mother working at a company. I’ve worked hard, and I’m still working hard. I’m recognized for my abilities at work. But one of my colleagues is really bothering me.”

Perhaps realizing that this was not the topic he wanted to discuss, Chae Eun-yeob’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“What do you mean by bothering you?”

“She tries to expose my status as a single mother before I disclose it myself, or she mentions my family background. After all, I’m the daughter of a single mother myself.”

“…”

“The fact that I’m a single mother, that I’m the daughter of a single mother, shouldn’t be a stigma, right? Shouldn’t it? But this friend, let’s call her Ms. C for convenience, has turned that into something shameful and maliciously slanders me. In this case, would it be possible to file a defamation lawsuit?”

“If you have evidence of what exactly the slander was, it is certainly possible to file a lawsuit.”

“I don’t have evidence, but I do have witnesses. I think my teammates can testify. Is it possible to file a lawsuit in this case? What procedures do I need to follow?”

“It’s often difficult to prove a crime with just witnesses. It would be much easier if there were at least one clear piece of evidence. Do you have any evidence at all?”

“Ugh. There’s really nothing that qualifies as evidence.”

Jeong-o let out a deep sigh and showed an expression of resignation.

“That’s unfortunate. I wanted to write a lawsuit right away.”

“Please gather evidence and come back. If it’s hard for you to visit, you can send it through other means. I will check and contact you.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Jeong-o sincerely thanked him, feeling his heart pounding since it was not easy to deceive someone skilled in lying.

“Does the child’s father know you came to see a lawyer?”

Even in this situation, Chae Eun-yeob was not forgetting his duty. He seemed to want to dig into how much Ji-heon knew about Jeong-o’s secret.

“Well, this wasn’t related to him, lawyer.”

“It’s a good thing to provide overall assistance.”

When Jeong-o pointed this out, Eun-yeob quickly changed the subject.

“Anyway, I understand. I’m writing down my personal phone number for you now. It might be quicker to contact me directly from now on.”

Chae Eun-yeob wrote his phone number and email address on a piece of paper and handed it over.

It would have been better to give a business card. But he probably couldn’t since he wasn’t Ha Jin-cheol.

“Thank you, lawyer. I almost ended up worrying alone for a long time, but I’m glad I came to see you.”

Jeong-o accepted the note and smiled.

In reality, she was so nervous that she was on the verge of tears.

Did my act work on Chae Eun-yeob? I wasn’t too confident, but at least I didn’t make any mistakes, so that’s good.

After saying goodbye to Chae Eun-yeob and safely leaving the office, Jeong-o got into a taxi and let out a ragged breath.

“Phew. Ha!”

The screen of her phone, which she had gripped tightly as if for survival, was damp with sweat. She could feel how tense she had been until the moment she left the building.

I need to find Ji-heon’s name and press it, but my hands kept trembling, causing my fingertips to slip several times.

During that time, the call and text message records with Ji-heon came up on the screen.

What is all this…?

Ji-heon had sent more text messages than she expected. More than once a day, he had been diligently sending her messages.

As her breath, which had been ragged due to Chae Eun-yeob, gradually settled.

– I came to the office, but Jeong-o is on vacation. Let’s rest well today and see each other tomorrow.

– Enjoy your lunch.

– I want to buy Ye-na a bicycle. What color does Ye-na like?

June 23, 12 PM.

June 24, 12 PM.

June 25, 12 PM…

12 PM. Jeong-o.

In the middle of the day, as if marking his presence in her daily life, and as if commemorating her name, he had been sending her text messages every day at noon.

This man, who behaved no differently from seven years ago despite losing his memory, was touching. He was truly grateful.

Jeong-o found the call button and pressed it.

Moments later, she heard the voice she loved, which had remained unchanged for a long time.

[Hello?]
“I miss you!”

Her true feelings burst out like an explosion.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After confirming the clues from seven years ago that he had lost, Ji-heon exited the jewelry shop.

Proposal Ring. A ring that I was planning to gift to someone.

It definitely wasn’t for my mother. If it had been, she would have mentioned it countless times.

Who have I dated, and why hasn’t she appeared?

Jiheon had never heard anyone, not even a friend, mention a ring or any stories about women.

Not even his close friend Seung-kyu talked to Jiheon about women.

Have I been hiding my romantic life from everyone? Is that why no one knows?

Amid all this, the face of Jeong-oh, who had fervently supported his memory recovery, came to mind.

“Well, you should meet. That person might have been waiting all this time.”

She had insisted that if someone was forgotten, they should be met again.

He remembered her trembling voice at that moment.

What kind of feelings did she have when she said those words to me?

What does regaining my memory mean for Lee Jeong-oh?

I’m so scared that I might lose something precious to me right now; what about you?

Jeong-oh. It seems I had someone I loved a long time ago.

If my memories return, do I really have to go find that person?

In truth, I don’t want to.

You, who were hurt once.

You were dumped by your ex-boyfriend and gave birth to a child, raising them alone.

I’m afraid my choice might cause you another wound.

The person I want to protect now is you, Jeong-oh.

As I touched the ring case, recalling her face, her voice, and everything about her, my phone vibrated as if by fate. The name “Jeong-oh” appeared on the screen, reading like a savior.

I answered the call immediately.

“Hello.”

[I miss you!]
Her single phrase made my heart ache. I tried to sound composed, hiding the rising emotions.

“Are you at home? I’ll come over.”

[No, I’m in a taxi right now. I’m heading your way.]

***

Jiheon quickly returned home, waiting outside for Jeong-oh.

After pacing for a few minutes, a taxi arrived. Jiheon ran to the car, and Jeong-oh jumped out, hugging him.

She also wrapped her arms around his neck. His solid chest felt more comforting than ever.

While her heart raced with emotions until arrival, being close to him calmed her down like a lie. But soon, another kind of trembling began.

She had come to see him, but she still had to hurry back home, to her mother’s place.

“I can’t stay long. I just wanted to see you flip pancakes since it’s your hobby.”

Jeong-oh said with a smile, giving an excuse. Jiheon’s eyes narrowed slightly. He felt a bit disappointed.

“… So, you didn’t come to see me, but just to watch the flipping?”

“Well, saying I wanted to see you and wanting to see the flipping are pretty similar, right?”

With her playful retort, Jiheon let out a low sigh.

He understood her situation well.

Lee Jeong-oh would never forget her responsibilities as a mother.

He admired and respected that side of her. But his instincts as a man who wanted to be with her longer couldn’t be ignored.

“Let’s go inside.”

Jiheon led Jeong-oh into his home.

Currently, Jiheon lived in a high-rise apartment complex. The quickly ascending elevator felt dizzying, making Jeong-oh subconsciously grip the handrail tightly.

Although she had boldly stated she missed him, perhaps she was now nervous at the moment.

“I really did come to see you cook.”

She insisted again, but her words didn’t reach him until the elevator doors opened. Instead, an arm draped over her shoulder. It seemed to be an attempt to prevent her from escaping.

The two stepped out of the elevator and stood in front of a neat door.

“This is it. And…”

9, 1, 3, 0. Jiheon showed Jeong-oh the numbers and pressed the keypad.

“I’ll change it soon, but for now, you should remember.”

With a click, the door opened, and Jeong-oh stepped inside at Jiheon’s direction.

“I’m terrible with numbers, so I’ll probably forget it quickly.”

“It’s my mother’s birthday. March 19th.”

“Then your mom knows the password too.”

“True, but I plan to change it.”

“Do you change your password often?”

She continued the conversation without even thinking to take off her shoes, prompting him to wrap his arms around her waist from behind.

Jeong-oh instinctively held her breath. A chuckle seemed to come from behind her, perhaps from near her backside.

His large, flexible hand swiftly brushed along her leg, gripping her ankle.

“Uh, uh, uh?”

Thud, thud.

As Jeong-oh fumbled in surprise, one of her heels fell off. He had taken off her shoe.

Before she knew it, she had stepped further inside the house.

As Jiheon straightened up after bending down to take off Jeong-oh’s shoes, his expression was neutral, but for some reason, it made her nervous.

No, it was genuinely just a pure desire to see him cook.

When his fingertips touched her face, warmth flowed through her. As his hand moved from her chin to her nape, it tickled and made her anxious at the same time.

As if sensing that feeling, his lips approached her. There was no pretense of cooking; he simply moved instinctively, just as he had seven years ago.

The problem was that she didn’t dislike it. But Jeong-oh recalled her responsibilities.

This was Korea, not a hotel in Melbourne, Australia. Today’s meeting was impulsive, and she had to quickly return home as a mother.

“I’m hungry.”

She desperately broke the long kiss, saying it between breaths.

He easily swallowed her words.

In the end, she pinched his chest.

He was startled, pulling back his lips. His gaze held a hint of reproach, but Jeong-oh didn’t back down.

“I said I’m hungry. I’m hungry.”

As she stubbornly asserted her point, he let out a heated sigh and rubbed his chest, where she had pinched him.

“Right. I almost forgot.”

“…”

“Our manager isn’t here for me, but for the pancakes.”

His jealousy toward pancakes made her laugh.

She could almost hear her blood boiling, but Jeong-oh turned away lightly, taking a step further inside.

“I’ll look around the house myself. Is that okay?”

“Feel free.”

As he sent her a keen glance, he finally resigned and turned around, while Jeong-oh let out a secret sigh.

Deep down, she had a desire to stay longer, but let’s refrain from that today.

Jeong-oh watched as Jiheon headed to the kitchen, then moved her feet.

Jiheon’s house was much larger and higher than his old officetel. The spacious living room’s large window revealed the dazzling night view of the Han River.

Despite that, it felt less cozy than his house from seven years ago, perhaps because there wasn’t much furniture or decor. The kitchen she glimpsed into didn’t seem to have many cooking tools either. It seemed the hobby of cooking was an exaggeration

As Jeheon walked down the hallway opposite, being alone brought back the unresolved thoughts he couldn’t finish.

How should he ask about Chae Eun-yeob? How should he warn him? Would it be better to awaken his memories now?

But awakening them would mean sharing his memories. His heart, which she had never glimpsed, might be different from hers.

“Is it okay to inject my memories into this person? Can I really say we were in love?”

This thought made Jeong-oh hesitate.

Lost in contemplation, Jeong-oh glanced at the rooms as if observing them. She casually scanned through the bedroom, study, training room, and then passed by a completely empty room until she reached the last door, the one that was closed, and grasped the doorknob.

It was an act she performed without really thinking, but once the door opened, her eyes grew warm.

…Hah.

A prepared sigh slipped from Jeong-oh’s lips.

“This is…”

Ch64 - Do you remember that memory?

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A small bed and desk. A small refrigerator, a small wardrobe. A small dresser…

These pieces of furniture. This layout.

Though there were no kitchen facilities at the end, Jeong-oh could tell.

This room was undoubtedly her old studio apartment.

A shiver ran through her body. Her eyes quickly became warm with tears.

She couldn’t believe it.

How, why, and how did this space come to be?

Seven years ago, Jeheon had liked Jeong-oh’s old home. That’s why they spent more time in her studio apartment than in his officetel. The reason he liked that house was clear and straightforward.

“I like this place. More than my home.”

“Why?”

“Because I can see you no matter where you are.”

Seven years ago, he once said that. He was honest and direct. When she changed clothes, when she made a funny mistake, or when she felt

inexplicably good, Jeheon would watch from the side and pull her close every time.

He said he felt at ease when she was in sight. Conversely, when she wasn't next to him, he felt an inexplicable anxiety and unease. That's why he liked that studio apartment; he could see everything about her.

'He's really found a desk that's quite similar.'

The room Jeheon had decorated was increasingly astonishing. From the size and design of the furniture to the color of the bed sheets and curtains, everything was quite similar.

When had he decorated this room? Was his memory gradually returning?

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Jeong-oh rushed to the kitchen with her overwhelmed heart.

"Have you finished looking around?"

Jeheon asked while preparing the pancake batter.

Though he had called it a hobby, it seemed it was just talk. Seven years ago, the aspiring cook Jeong Ji-heon, who kept a tidy small kitchen, had become an amateur who carelessly made a mess of a larger kitchen.

Seeing what Jeheon had laid out, she couldn't help but smile as she started the conversation.

"There's that last room. It feels different from the others. It doesn't quite fit this house."

"Oh, that one."

Jeheon acknowledged her observation with a nod.

"I don't really remember, but I think I visited a place like that a long time ago."

“…When? Whose house?”

“I don’t remember anything. Not if it was when I was ten or if it was after I turned twenty.”

“……”

“I just vaguely have that furniture and layout stuck in my head, so I tried to reconstruct it. That memory felt nice for some reason.”

As Jeong-oh listened to his voice, her eyes became hazy with tears.

“After actually decorating it, I sometimes sleep in that room, and it somewhat helps with my insomnia. For some reason, when I go in there, my mind feels at ease.”

Hah. Should she laugh or cry?

“Seung-kyu says it’s just a typical studio apartment.”

I wonder how far his memories have come.

Jeong-oh’s thoughts returned to the hesitation she had before opening the door. Then she thought of the people whose lives might change because of the burden she was carrying, and her mother, Lee Guk-soon, came to mind.

Her mother had never once asked who Ye-na’s father was. She had never spoken ill of him.

Jeong-oh hadn’t brought it up first; it wasn’t just bad luck. If that memory hurt her daughter, she wouldn’t bring it up to stab her heart.

Now, Jeong-oh could faintly understand what her mother’s patience was.

The Jeong Ji-heon in front of her was completely unaware of the intense feelings she held as he focused solely on cooking. His eyes occasionally flickered, showing signs of forgetting the next step in the cooking process.

This person is trying hard.

I believe in this person.

I believe that you can remember me in your own way.

Of course, before it gets too late, I will speak up first, but I believe I'll get at least a hint before that. So I will wait.

I hope you retrieve your memories in your own time. I wish for you to bring out that deep memory untainted by anyone.

"Okay. Look."

As Jeong-oh let her thoughts flow for a moment, he had already flipped the pancakes alone. It happened in an instant.

"Did you see it?"

"No, I didn't see it."

Wanting to see it properly once more, Jeong-oh lied.

"…Make sure you watch closely, okay?"

Jeheon glanced at her before firmly grasping the frying pan again.

Whoosh! Flip!

His movements were clumsy compared to seven years ago, but he flipped the pancakes quite skillfully.

"How's that? Am I better?"

The current Jeong Ji-heon, competing against his past self, looked at her with a smug smile.

Jeong-oh couldn't help but smile back. She couldn't speak anymore, afraid her trembling voice would give her away.

Her love for her child, her desire to protect her child—nothing more than that, but somehow Jeong Ji-heon had also entered Jeong-oh's life. She began to wish for him to be at peace and happy as well.

I am experiencing a long first love.

The cold season in my heart melts away.

Jeong-oh calmed her inner turmoil. She vowed to become a stronger person.

Yes. Jeheon. I will wait patiently. I hope spring comes.

Let's keep holding on together.

I believe you are coming closer to me now.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Eun-bi found herself running errands after a long time. She stopped by her parents' house to gather her brother's clothes and side dishes before heading to Eun-yeob's house.

Her mother had instructed Eun-bi to tidy up her brother's mess since his officetel was likely to be dirty. Normally, Eun-bi would have complained and been annoyed, but today she willingly volunteered. There was something she needed to find at her brother's house.

Perhaps trusting her mother's organizing skills, Eun-yeob's house was always a mess. However, it was quite meticulous, and there were hardly any traces left of work. Thus, Eun-bi had to search for a long time to find what she was looking for.

'Here it is! Just as I thought!'

As Eun-bi had been rummaging through Eun-yeob's house for about an hour, she found some materials. They were about Lee Jeong-oh. She thought her brother would definitely have researched Lee Jeong-oh separately.

However, there wasn’t much information. There was far more about Lee Jeong-oh’s daughter, and Eun-bi frowned as she read the materials. Still, there was no information about the child’s father at all.

The quality of the research was so poor that it made her scoff, but Eun-bi didn’t despair. The materials also contained information about Lee Jeong-oh’s mother, Lee Guk-soon.

Eun-bi took a photo of the restaurant address run by Guk-soon and exited Eun-yeob’s house.

The next appointment was at a hotel, quite far from both her workplace and home, so it took a significant amount of time to get there. Because of rummaging through Eun-yeob’s house, she was 40 minutes late for the appointment. Eun-bi felt a bit anxious for no reason.

She hurriedly parked her car in the hotel parking lot and entered the lobby. She was nervous, fearing the man might have left, but he was still waiting for her.

Seeing the man striding toward her after spotting her made Eun-bi’s eyes well up with tears.

Feeling a bit guilty, her voice came out sweetly.

“Hey, did you wait long?”

“Yeah. I was just about to leave.”

The man rolled his eyes but couldn’t help chuckling at Eun-bi’s smile.

“I can put up with it because you’re so pretty.”

Eun-bi liked the compliment.

She hooked her arm tightly around the man’s. He was someone she compared to Jeong Ji-heon in every way. He listened to her complaints, accepted her sorrows, comforted her, and hugged her. Most importantly, he understood Eun-bi’s circumstances.

She received the comfort from this man that she had not gotten from Ji-heon.

His kindness was much deeper than Jeong Ji-heon's, and he was as tall and handsome as Ji-heon, which made her like him even more.

'If it weren't for this man, I wouldn't have been able to endure.'

In her hellish reality, he was like a light to Eun-bi.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Monday, after a boring weekend without seeing Lee Jeong-oh.

Since it was the end of the month and busy, Ji-heon contacted the credit card company. He was looking to find out the usage history of a card that was opened under his name but had been canceled seven years ago.

November 2, seven years ago. The credit card used to purchase the ring.

The information obtained from the jewelry shop was all Ji-heon knew, so he couldn't even properly provide the card number to the representative. However, the representative was quite kind.

[Sir, we are required to keep card usage records for five years, but the usage history for a card that was canceled seven years ago might be possible or impossible to retrieve. First, please send a copy of your ID via fax. I'll need you to complete a phone verification following the text message I send you.]

"Yes. Understood. After verifying my identity, when can I expect to receive the information?"

[If the usage history can be retrieved, I can send the materials to your email today. If it cannot be retrieved, I will contact you separately.]

"Yes. Thank you for your assistance."

Ji-heon politely thanked the representative and hung up.

A moment later, a text message arrived from the credit card company. Ji-heon sent a copy of his ID via fax according to the text message instructions and completed the identity verification.

Now, it was a waiting game.

His mind was filled with unease.

In the drawer, which he opened to put away the copy of his ID, lay the ring he had purchased on Friday. He wanted to see Lee Jeong-oh smiling brightly while wearing that ring.

Ji-heon decided that what he was doing now was “sorting out the past that needed to be organized to move forward.”

Determined, he received an email notification.

It was the information from the credit card company.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

In the evening.

Guk-soon began her dinner service.

While Guk-soon worked, Ye-na spent time on a small porch next to the kitchen.

At an age when she should be playing joyfully, the porch in the restaurant could have been stifling for a small child, but perhaps due to having adjusted to this routine, the child seemed calm.

Ye-na occasionally observed how busy her grandmother was while jotting down the orders that came in today in a notebook, studying math, reading books, folding colored paper, playing Go by herself, and eavesdropping on the customers’ conversations, finding ways to enjoy her boring time.

Guk-soon watched her granddaughter with a mix of admiration and pity.

It was such a peaceful daily life.

Today, a regular customer greeted Guk-soon warmly as he left.

“Boss, it was delicious.”

“Yes, thank you. Come again.”

“If you sold alcohol here, your sales would double. No, it would even quintuple.”

Since it was a place that didn’t sell alcohol, the dinner crowd was generally small. The regulars lamented the lack of evening customers due to Guk-soon’s excellent cooking, but Guk-soon was satisfied with the current state.

After all, she had to be cautious about the dinner business because of the child.

Once the regular customer left, the restaurant became quiet again. Perhaps due to the hot weather, there were no customers today.

“Should we head home early today?”

“Yes!”

If they went home early, they could watch TV, do somersaults, and Ye-na brightened up at her grandmother’s suggestion. But as soon as Ye-na got up from the porch, the restaurant door opened.

Ye-na lay back down on the porch with a disappointed expression, and Guk-soon stood up to greet the newcomer with a smile.

“Welcome!”

However, the smile that had naturally appeared quickly faded.

She could vaguely recognize the person who entered through the door.

“Oh my, who is this? Hello, ma’am!”

“……”

“Do you remember me? I’m Cha Eun-bi.”

Though her face had changed quite a bit, that subtly sharp voice remained the same. Guk-soon’s complexion darkened.

Ch65 - To Jeong-oh

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As Guk-soon stared blankly, Eun-bi said her name again.

“Don’t you remember? Cha Eun-bi. We were classmates at Jeong-oh High School.”

“Ah… I see.”

Guk-soon could barely respond. She couldn’t muster a warm welcome or even a smile.

The bad blood with Cha Eun-bi was already over ten years old, yet it felt as fresh as yesterday.

Thirteen years ago, while working in Jeong-oh’s school cafeteria, Guk-soon was forced to leave because of a commotion involving Cha Eun-bi. After that, Guk-soon had to go to Gunsan to find a new job, and Jeong-oh had to live alone, separated from her mother.

At that time, her daughter was seventeen, an age when she needed her parents the most, but she was left to fend for herself. Guk-soon, who had to live apart from her precious daughter, also faced heart-wrenching days every single day.

So, she still felt sorry for her daughter.

That’s why she didn’t know how to treat this girl in front of her.

“But didn’t Jeong-oh mention me? I work at the same company as Jeong-oh.”

Since Guk-soon didn’t seem very welcoming, Eun-bi asked with a slightly displeased expression. This was information Guk-soon didn’t know. As Guk-soon looked at her in surprise, Eun-bi let out a small laugh.

“So, Jeong-oh hasn’t mentioned it at all. I’m actually Eun-bi’s superior at the company, ma’am.”

Guk-soon recalled a recent conversation she had with her daughter.

“Mom, there was a girl I really didn’t like back in my first year of high school. I met her at work.”

“Why didn’t you get along? You could have been friends.”

“She just doesn’t have good character. But she’s still pretty much the same.”

“……”

“I had a bit of a conflict with her today, and I’m really upset.”

That girl was Cha Eun-bi.

Fearing that her mother would be upset, her daughter hadn’t even been able to mention the name Cha Eun-bi.

How much had her daughter struggled? How much had she been hurt during that time?

Guk-soon felt a deep regret for not supporting her daughter more back then and for scolding her.

Still, Guk-soon couldn’t say harsh words to Cha Eun-bi in front of her. If Eun-bi was Jeong-oh’s superior, then to Guk-soon, Eun-bi was still someone to be respected.

“Well, it’s good to see you. It’s been a while. Please, have a seat.”

As Eun-bi moved to the seat Guk-soon had indicated, she said with a cheerful expression.

“Wow. I didn’t expect to see you here. This is my friend, and this is a close BJ of mine.”

Eun-bi introduced the two people who had come with her to Guk-soon.

“Do you know what a BJ is? They’re internet broadcasters. This is great. So-young, please introduce this restaurant on your show. Let’s get the business some attention.”

“Let’s taste it first.”

The person referred to as a BJ replied with a snort.

Guk-soon, however, just wanted these people to leave quickly. She regretted not having closed the restaurant early and anxiously waited for their order.

Eun-bi glanced at the menu and placed an order.

“Three servings of the lunch set, please. My friends are precious guests who rarely visit this kind of restaurant, so I’d appreciate your best effort.”

Guk-soon quietly took the order and went into the kitchen. Since the side dishes were already prepared, all that was needed was to cook the stew, so it wouldn’t take long.

She had to serve them quickly and send them off.

It had been thirteen years since she started working in the restaurant business. Thinking about all the various difficult customers she had encountered over the years made this reunion seem trivial.

Nothing would happen if she did her job well.

Guk-soon put extra care into serving the rice, arranging the side dishes, and plating the stew. She even added steamed eggs and grilled fish. Before she knew it, there were ten different side dishes.

“If it’s not enough, just let me know. I can provide more.”

Guk-soon said to the customers as she brought a large spread to their table.

“Yes, thank you for the meal.”

Eun-bi replied gratefully.

Before long, the camera was rolling. Guk-soon asked the BJ for permission.

“Excuse me, but we don’t allow filming in our restaurant. Could you please turn off the camera?”

“Yes, we won’t broadcast it.”

The BJ answered coldly. Guk-soon turned and went back to the kitchen.

She could hear whispers from the dining area. However, the conversations were too quiet to catch any words. She grew anxious, wondering if they would broadcast something strange or do something odd, just like thirteen years ago.

A little while later, she heard Eun-bi calling for her from the dining area. It had only been five minutes since the table was set.

“Here’s the bill.”

Guk-soon, who was sitting on the porch, jumped up and went to the cash register. The food and side dishes on the table were almost untouched.

“You hardly ate your rice…”

“Yeah, it wasn’t to my taste.”

“Then, you don’t have to pay. Just go.”

“No, you put in a lot of effort to prepare this, so you should at least accept something.”

Eun-bi’s friend pulled out a 100,000-won check and placed it on the counter.

Not expecting to receive a check, Guk-soon opened the cash register.

While Guk-soon hurriedly fumbled for change, Eun-bi strolled calmly into the back of the kitchen. She spotted a child folding origami on the porch. Eun-bi recognized her immediately.

“You must be Ye-na?”

“Yes.”

Ye-na looked up and replied.

“Is your mom working, so you’re playing here alone? Oh dear, that’s too bad.”

“……”

“You’re very pretty, just like your mom. Who’s your dad?”

Ye-na didn’t say anything further and just blinked her eyes. She was puzzled as to why a stranger was showing interest in her.

“Hey, can you not talk?”

Sighing deeply, Eun-bi pulled out a 50,000-won bill from her wallet and handed it to Ye-na.

“Here. This is for you because you’re pretty.”

“…….”

“You should say thank you when an adult gives you something.”

As Eun-bi waved the money and stared intently, Ye-na, feeling pressured by her demeanor, accepted the money.

“Thank you.”

“Good. You’re kind.”

Eun-bi turned around, satisfied.

Jeong-oh. You twisted my life, so isn’t it only fair that I step on yours?

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After finishing work, Ji-heon searched for a flower shop located near the jewelry store.

Flower Dream. This flower shop’s name was listed in the credit card statement he received from the card company. Fortunately, the flower shop had retained that name for seven years.

On November 2, seven years ago, he had purchased a ring at the jewelry store and made a credit card payment at “Flower Dream.”

Since it was quite a large amount, it could be inferred that he had bought flowers for a proposal.

He hoped to find a clue here, no matter how small.

With a trembling heart, Ji-heon opened the door to the flower shop.

“Welcome!”

A man wearing an apron greeted Ji-heon. The shop was large, filled with many flowers. At a large table on one side, a woman was arranging flowers in a basket.

“Hello. Excuse me, but I’d like to ask you something.”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“I made a credit card payment here seven years ago, but I can’t remember it well. Did you operate this flower shop back then?”

“Yes, that’s right. My wife and I were running the shop together back then. We’ve been in business for nine years now.”

“Then could you check this transaction for me?”

Ji-heon handed the man the checked credit card statement.

The man took the document and tilted his head.

“Seven years ago… Since we get quite a number of orders every day, it’s a bit difficult to remember each customer. However, since it was over 500,000 won, it likely was for a large pot set or a proposal… But you don’t remember exactly?”

The man spoke with a tone that suggested it was strange for a customer not to remember such a large amount.

Ji-heon had no choice but to share his circumstances.

“After I made this payment, I had an accident the next day. I lost some of my memories, and I came here hoping to find a clue about it.”

Sharing personal matters with a stranger was one of the things he dreaded the most. But his desire to find even a small clue compelled him to open up. He felt a pang of embarrassment, having never asked a stranger for help before.

He thought of Jeong-oh on May 27. How did she feel when she couldn’t mention that it was Ye-na’s birthday while asking him for an early leave?

Desperate people often give up something to get what they want, sometimes even risking their lives. They move forward, relying solely on a compass in an endless sea, envisioning a faint hope waving from afar.

He came to understand the poignancy of life. It seems that one sees as much as they have experienced.

The flower shop owner’s expression quickly changed as he listened to Ji-heon’s story. The woman arranging flowers at the table also dusted off her hands and approached Ji-heon.

“Honey, we usually take photos of flowers ordered for proposals. We might have some pictures.”

At the woman’s encouraging words, Ji-heon joined in.

“Yes. It’s highly likely it was an order for a proposal. I also ordered a ring on the same day.”

“…….”

“Please, I’m asking you sincerely.”

At Ji-heon’s earnest request, the woman nudged her husband’s shoulder. The man had no choice but to nod and sat down in front of the PC.

“I’m not sure if the files are still around.”

While the man rummaged through the PC files, the woman offered Ji-heon a chair.

“Please have a seat.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“If I had been working with my husband back then, I would have remembered. I was pregnant at the time and couldn’t work much.”

In response to the woman’s kind conversation, Ji-heon replied warmly.

“Then your child must be about seven years old now.”

“Yes, she’s seven now.”

The woman’s response reminded Ji-heon of Ye-na. Since Ye-na’s birthday was May 27, that meant Jeong-oh was pregnant around that time.

The man, searching through several folders, said, “Finding the photo files is taking a bit longer because I didn’t organize them properly.”

“I’m sorry for asking such a troublesome favor.”

“No, it’s fine.”

At Ji-heon’s polite and respectful apology, the man continued his work without complaining. As the search dragged on, the woman, who had been hovering around Ji-heon, returned to the table to continue her work.

Thirty minutes passed.

“Oh, here it is. November 2. This must be it.”

As the man spoke, Ji-heon stood up from his chair. The woman rushed over.

On the large table lay a photo filled with various beautiful flowers, creating a floral garden. Above it was a garland that read, “MARRY ME?”

“But this is a bit different. It looks like it was arranged on a table. Usually, we decorate the car trunk and take photos.”

The man tilted his head in confusion. Just then, the woman clapped her hands loudly.

“Ah! I remember! Someone ordered flowers for a proposal and made the payment, but they said they would come pick them up the next day, and then their phone was off, and we couldn’t get in touch with them!”

The man, who had been rolling his eyes, raised his voice.

“Oh, right! Exactly! That’s why we couldn’t take the picture in the trunk of the car and took it on the table instead. I was really worried back then. Was the car involved in an accident before the proposal, or did someone get into a traffic accident? The person who ordered was really handsome… Yes! It was a customer!”

As the memory came back, the man grabbed Ji-heon’s hand with a more excited expression than the woman.

“…Can I check the photos?”

Ji-heon managed to say with a voice that trembled in his chest.

“Yes. Please sit here.”

The man pulled out a chair in front of the PC for Ji-heon.

Ji-heon sat down and slowly looked through the photos.

MARRY ME?

At the sight of the letters on the garland, Ji-heon felt a sting in his eyes.

“I really wanted to marry someone.”

And due to the traffic accident, he had completely forgotten about that person. An indescribable, strange heaviness stirred in his heart. Amidst that confusion, Ji-heon noticed a card elegantly written on the right edge of the photo.

His eyes widened as he recognized the writing on the card.

– TO Jeong-oh

That name was unmistakably Jeong-oh.

Ch66 - A Stormy Night

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Jeong-oh. Lee Jeong-oh.

Ji-heon’s eyes, staring at the monitor, became glassy with tears. Red veins burst on the whites of his eyes.

It was as if he were about to cry blood.

“Are you okay, sir…?”

The man, who had been silently watching, asked with concern.

“…Can I take this photo with me?”

Ji-heon couldn’t hide the tremor in his voice as he made the request. The man readily agreed and sent him the file.

After collecting the photo, Ji-heon left the flower shop and immediately contacted Seung-kyu.

[Hey, friend.] “Are you off work?”

[Yeah. I’m on my way home. Why?] “Do you still have the information about Lee Jeong-oh that you investigated?”

[Uh… yeah.] Seung-kyu’s voice lowered, as if it were a difficult topic to discuss.

“Can you send that to my email?”

Ji-heon requested. He had never personally checked the information Seung-kyu had gathered about Lee Jeong-oh.

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After enjoying a relaxing weekend, Monday arrived. It was time to start working late again.

Jeong-oh returned to his seat after a long meeting, leaning back lazily in his chair. Whenever someone appeared in the hallway leading to Ji-heon's office, he unconsciously straightened his back.

Today, that person left work early.

At exactly noon, he received a text message saying he was busy with work. Although he had seen Ji-heon's face from a distance a couple of times, it was just to check that he was doing okay.

Although they belonged to the same company and the same department, the distance between their offices and her desk made them feel far apart.

It wasn't unusual for him not to see her often, but why did it feel so suffocating today?

It was probably because of the dream he had last night.

In the dream, Jeong-oh and Ye-na wore matching beautiful white dresses and walked through a park when they spotted Ji-heon. Ji-heon was also dressed in a sharp suit.

While Jeong-oh hesitated upon recognizing Ji-heon, Ye-na ran to him with open arms and jumped into his embrace.

Ji-heon sat down on a park bench, holding Ye-na on his lap while she smiled comfortably, as if her mother didn't care at all.

The problem was Jeong-oh's feelings. He wanted to take Ye-na away from Ji-heon, but his legs wouldn't move. He awoke from the dream with a jolt, feeling his stiff legs struggle to bend.

Dreams are reflections of the unconscious. It seemed that the fear of someone taking Ye-na away manifested in his dream.

Meeting Chae Eun-byeol on Friday was probably one of the stressors too.

Anyway, since he had decided to wait for Ji-heon’s memories to return, he would try to endure for a while.

Jeong-oh made an effort to think positively about the stressors.

At least he had figured out who the suspicious person was, which was a relief.

He couldn’t tell from which direction the arrows would fly, but now he felt like he had a sense of direction. Furthermore, since Chae Eun-byeol approached him by impersonating another lawyer, he could use that as leverage.

What should he do?

While he was deep in thought, he heard the sound of clicking heels. It seemed that Chae Eun-bi, who had been frequently going out lately, was coming in from somewhere, preparing to start working late.

“That team never collaborates at all.”

He felt sorry for the leader of Team 1, Ahn Chan-seob, and returned his hands to the keyboard. It seemed better to think about this at home and finish work quickly so he could leave.

However, this time, his phone vibrated. The name “Mom Guk-soon” appeared on the screen. Jeong-oh immediately answered the call.

“Hello.”

[Mom.] “Princess Ye-na!”

The voice that came through the receiver was not Guk-soon’s but his daughter’s. Jeong-oh’s voice rose with excitement as he greeted Ye-na.

After the fact that he was a single mother became widely known in the office, he no longer felt the need to worry about anyone's gaze.

Park Young-gwang, who was sitting beside him, chuckled as he watched Jeong-oh run down the hallway with his phone to his ear.

At 8 PM, checking the time, Jeong-oh asked.

"Did you get home?"

[Yeah.] "Did you wash up? Have you washed?"

[Yeah. I took a bath by myself today.] "Good job. What's Grandma doing?"

[She's doing laundry in the bathroom.] Ye-na's voice, which had answered matter-of-factly, suddenly dropped in tone.

[Mom, but Grandma cried today.] The smile that had filled Jeong-oh's face faded at Ye-na's urgent news.

"Why? Did something happen?"

[No. Someone just came to the restaurant. But Grandma cried, so she didn't clean up and came home.] "Did a strange customer come?"

[I don't know. They ordered food but didn't eat any of it before leaving.] "A customer didn't eat, and that made Grandma cry?"

[I'm not sure. But that customer is a friend of Mom's.] "What?"

[They said their name was Chae Eun-bi twice. And they gave me 50,000 won too.] Jeong-oh turned his head to look at Chae Eun-bi's desk. She was busy working, shaking her shoulders as if something delighted her. Come to think of it, she had recently been showing only a sour face, but now she had a strangely cheerful expression.

Chae Eun-bi. You've finally touched my family.

[But Grandma took the money away. She said it had to be returned.] "……"

[Mom, but Grandma secretly cried. What I told you is a secret.] Before Jeong-oh could respond, the call was abruptly disconnected. It seemed she had made the call in secret.

Seeing Eun-bi rise from her seat and head to the bathroom, Jeong-oh followed right behind her.

“Chae Eun-bi.”

Eun-bi, who was touching up her makeup in front of the sink, looked at Jeong-oh and smirked at him with one side of her mouth raised.

“Did you go to my mom’s restaurant?”

“Lee Jeong-oh, this is the office. We’re here for business.”

Eun-bi pointed out, but Jeong-oh wasn’t in the mood for business.

“Why did you give my daughter money?”

“She seemed really happy to get it.”

“……”

“I thought she was a beggar since she accepted it so eagerly.”

Slap!

Unable to contain his anger, Jeong-oh slapped Eun-bi across the face.

The impact left Jeong-oh’s palm stinging, and it was probably a shock for Eun-bi as well.

Eun-bi, who collapsed onto the sink, covered her cheek and glared at Jeong-oh. Though she had intended to use that incident to her advantage, it felt truly unpleasant now that it had actually happened.

“How dare you hit me?”

Eun-bi stood up, veins popping in her neck as she shouted.

“Is that why they say that food is as good as the family you come from?”

“……”

“Is being a single mother a point of pride in your family? Is being reckless with your body hereditary? But for the sake of your life, you should have had an abortion. You wouldn’t want to hear that you take after your mom, right?”

With Eun-bi’s ranting, Jeong-oh’s hand rose once again.

“Ahh!”

Eun-bi covered her cheek, which had been hit, with both arms and shouted. The sight was truly amusing.

“Enough. You’re just beyond saving.”

Jeong-oh, having withdrawn his hands, turned around in resignation.

“Don’t ever touch my family again. This is a warning.”

“What’s a warning? I’m going to sue you too! For assault!”

Eun-bi yelled after Jeong-oh, who was leaving first. At that moment, a ridiculous voice came from behind her.

[Is being a single mother a family legacy? Is it genetic to recklessly treat your body? You should have thought about your life and gotten rid of the child. I guess you didn’t want to hear that you take after your mom and use your body carelessly.]

It was her own voice just a moment ago.

Assistant Ko Eun-joo, who had just come out of the restroom stall, pressed the stop button on the recording file.

“Don’t misunderstand, manager. This isn’t illegal eavesdropping; I was just testing how well my voice carries in the restroom, and you ruined my data.”

Eun-joo coldly scoffed and left the restroom first.

“You pretended to be so refined, but you’re just pathetic.”

Her muttered words were clearly heard by Eun-bi as she left.

Eun-bi’s face twitched in anger.

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When Ji-heon returned home, he immediately checked the email sent by Seung-kyu.

– My friend, I did this investigation at your request, but I feel a strong sense of guilt. Please keep it a secret that I conducted this investigation.

Attached to the email were several documents that Seung-kyu had received through a company, along with a heartfelt plea.

Ji-heon carefully examined the documents line by line. As he scrutinized the rigidly presented facts, his heart raced more than ever.

Lee Jeong-oh’s daughter, Lee Ye-na. 7 years old. Born on May 27, six years ago, at a hospital in Gunsan.

The child’s blood type is B.

Lee Jeong-oh is type O, yet the child is B.

The information, which began with a brief profile of Lee Jeong-oh’s family, delved deeper into Jeong-oh’s past.

When she was in college, she lived in a one-room apartment in the Haengdang-dong area. Ji-heon felt a strange sense of familiarity with the address and opened his roadmap. He quickly remembered the place.

It was where he had met Lee Jeong-oh during the tasting event for Daewon Liquor’s new product.

‘Was I drawn to that place by memories I couldn’t recall?’

Had he frequented that place a lot in the past? Was that why he instinctively sought it out?

Despite telling himself not to jump to conclusions, his thoughts kept drifting towards a predetermined conclusion.

And then there was the working holiday period seven years ago when Lee Jeong-oh left for Melbourne, Australia.

He had also been in Melbourne during that time. Was this a coincidence?

Am I forcing a ridiculous story to fit? Huh? Lee Jeong-oh.

Now, his whole body trembled as if it were a heart beating wildly.

With trembling fingers, Ji-heon clicked to turn the page again and let out a rough sigh.

A photo taken during her working holiday period was embedded in the document.

Long straight hair, a sky-blue T-shirt with characters printed on it.

Ji-heon pulled out his phone and opened a photo he had taken at the restaurant “The Crown” in Melbourne.

… Yes. That shirt.

It was her. It was Lee Jeong-oh.

His gaze on the monitor became vacant. With a long sigh, Ji-heon straightened up and spotted the words “THE CROWN” piled high in his inbox. There was an email from the owner of The Crown sent just a few hours ago.

Ji-heon clicked on the email.

Mr. Jeong,

I hope you are well. I'm reaching out because I remembered your request during your visit to our restaurant last week.

I had the opportunity to review the CCTV footage from the day you visited, and I noticed that about an hour before your arrival, an Asian woman touched one of the pictures on the wall.

It seemed she took your picture. Do you know this woman?

Ji-heon downloaded and opened the video attached to the email. The interior of The Crown restaurant came into view.

In a rather quiet restaurant, an Asian woman with a hat walked in.

It was Lee Jeong-oh. There was no mistaking it; it was her.

Jeong-oh, sitting in a corner of the restaurant, gazed at the wall covered in photos, then noticed something. After checking to see if anyone was watching, she removed a photo from the wall.

Tears welled up in his throat.

Lee Jeong-oh. Who on earth are you?

What on earth were you feeling as you watched me?

He felt an overwhelming urge to meet her immediately and hear her story.

Ji-heon left his house right away. The entire ride down in the elevator, he felt nauseous and dizzy. He recalled Lee Jeong-oh, who had tightly grasped the handrail in the elevator with him.

Finally reaching the underground parking lot, Ji-heon realized that he hadn't even brought his car keys. He had to go back home, but his legs were trembling.

The world around him felt unbearably heavy.

He needed to get to her.

Ji-heon briefly sat down but then stood up again. At that moment.

Screech!

A car that had not noticed the person sitting down abruptly stopped, realizing Ji-heon’s presence too late, making tire-squealing sounds.

Flash. The headlights shone brightly on Ji-heon’s face.

A flash of light sparked in his mind.

Tears he couldn’t hold back fell.

I love you, Jeong-oh.

Why did I hold back those words?

Ch67 - Just One Word

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Screech!

Ji-heon, unable to dodge the approaching car, collapsed as if his legs had given way.

The driver of the car got out and rushed over.

“Hey, are you okay? I didn’t hit you with my car….”

The driver asked, looking perplexed.

“It seems like you have health issues; maybe you should go to the hospital….”

“No, no, I’m fine.”

Ji-heon barely managed to rise to his feet. As he trudged back toward the elevator, he thought that he might be going crazy.

At the moment the headlights of the car flashed, a name lodged in his mind.

A strange emotion also surged within him.

I love you, Jeong-oh.

Why did I hold back those words?

Regretting that he couldn’t tell her he loved her…

Other than that, he couldn’t recall any memories.

It felt like he was clinging to fragments of memory, discovering remnants of a home that had already turned to ruins.

Are my memories real? Or are they delusions I’ve created?

However, it felt too vivid to dismiss as mere delusions…

Ji-heon recalled the day he first met Jeong-oh two months ago.

The woman who had trembled at the sight of his face. It was so odd how tense she seemed, so he had called her to his office separately out of concern.

At that time, too, she had worn a tense expression. Yet, there was also a sense that she seemed to be blaming herself.

There were moments when she would ask him, as if trying to engrave herself in his memory.

“…Do you know who I am?”

“Of course. You’re the copywriter Lee Jeong-oh.”

“…Anything beyond that?”

“Is there anything else I need to know?”

Avoiding her desperate gaze, he had responded coldly.

Wanting to control himself from being swept away by her, he had treated her even more brusquely.

“Have you ever heard my name? My name, Lee Jeong-oh.”

“Have you done any advertising that’s famous enough for people to know your name?”

The look of disappointment she had given him at that moment seemed to question why he didn’t recognize her.

Recalling each of their meetings and conversations only deepened his suspicions.

“There was a couple who loved each other… They thought they loved each other, but maybe they didn’t. As soon as the woman learned of her pregnancy, the man left. So, the woman raised the child alone. Then, years later, the man appeared before her.”

“Actually, he’s not her father; he’s her older brother. The director resembles my ex-boyfriend.”

“Because you act just like my heartless ex-boyfriend.”

Was all of that me?

Her enigmatic stories. Were they hints she was throwing my way?

So, you were hoping I would find my memories on my own by giving me hints?

“Director, I hope you find your memories. They can’t be useless memories. I believe they aren’t. They might be hidden deep within, in a place no one can find, like a time capsule.”

Did you wait for me like that? Believing that someday my memories would return?

Even after the elevator stopped and the doors opened, Ji-heon couldn’t move. The words she had shared seemed to clutch his heart tightly, squeezing and shaking it at will.

He managed to take a few steps and opened the front door.

However, as soon as he opened the door and stepped inside, he crumbled again.

“Ah…”

Your child…

“Our Ye-na is so pretty, right?”

“Even though that person and I were such insignificant people, something so radiant could still come out of it.”

“Still, I’m grateful. There’s nothing I can do about it. After all, you made Ye-na.”

You were especially affectionate when talking about the child.

You spoke so lovingly that it made even me fall in love with you.

Ji-heon recalled the moment he had held Ye-na. He had thought she felt warm, so he lifted her forehead to check her temperature. Then he noticed her distinct salmon birthmark.

Ji-heon quietly raised his hand to touch his own forehead, where the salmon birthmark had vanished.

Lee Jeong-oh is type O, and the child is type B.

I’m also type B.

Was she our child?

Ye-na… was she the child of you and me?

Staggering, he searched for his car smart key with trembling legs. Other thoughts consumed his mind, and he couldn’t remember where the car keys were.

Thinking he should at least grab the spare key, he went to his study. The spare key was in the desk drawer of the study. Beneath the spare key, he saw a thick document that had been folded and carelessly placed in the drawer.

A proposal written by Jeong-oh on May 27. He traced the two lines of copy she had added with his fingertips.

– You, who have forgotten me.

You will weep longing for what you have forgotten.

Finally, thick tears rolled down his cheeks.

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Not many people heard the commotion between Jeong-oh and Eun-bi in the restroom. Nevertheless, a few were astonished enough to cover their mouths. Pretty and charming, and coming from a good family, her colleagues regarded Cha Eun-bi as a dignified copywriter.

So when people heard the rumors that Eun-bi and Ji-heon had broken up, they sided with Eun-bi and spoke ill of Ji-heon. Many felt sympathy for Eun-bi.

However, the voice coming from the restroom contradicted the image that colleagues had of Cha Eun-bi. Instead of merely looking down on single mothers, Eun-bi was openly criticizing the mother, and people were quite shocked by her tirade.

As Eun-bi emerged from the restroom, people discreetly slipped away, glancing nervously.

Eun-bi approached Jo Yu-ri, the assistant from Production Team 1, who was awkwardly standing nearby.

“Assistant Jo, you heard, right? I’m going to sue Lee Jeong-oh for assault. Will you be my witness?”

“Um, Manager…”

Jo Yu-ri avoided Eun-bi’s gaze and spoke softly.

“…I didn’t hear much. Could you ask someone else?”

Team Leader Ahn Chan-seop, who was standing beside her, also cleared his throat.

“Uh, Manager Cha Eun-bi, you seem to be under a lot of stress today. Maybe you should go home and rest.”

Eun-bi was flabbergasted.

After getting off work, Eun-bi went straight to Ji-heon’s family home, the house of Mrs. Jang Yeong-mi.

Upon learning that Eun-bi had come, Mrs. Jang rushed out on tiptoes.

Since she hadn’t been in contact with Eun-bi for a while, and Ji-heon had also left suddenly after visiting home a few days ago, she had been feeling anxious. Mrs. Jang had even thought about visiting Max Planning tomorrow to see Ji-heon and Eun-bi.

“Mother!”

Recognizing Mrs. Jang, Eun-bi burst into tears.

“Eun-bi, what’s going on? Why are you like this?”

Mrs. Jang anxiously embraced Eun-bi.

The girl who had a long relationship with her son was now in distress. Although her son had let Eun-bi go, Mrs. Jang still had lingering feelings. She was also worried about whether she would ever find another daughter-in-law who was as smart and dedicated to her in-laws as Eun-bi.

The story that Ji-heon and Eun-bi often broke up and got back together was a glimmer of hope.

“I’m sorry for not being in touch….”

“No, no, it’s okay.”

“I think I’ve broken up with oppa. It was so scary to say that…”

“Oh dear, what happened…?”

Mrs. Jang liked Eun-bi, but as long as her son was resolute, there was nothing she could do. If she could, she wanted to force Ji-heon and Eun-bi to marry.

“I wish I could help, but there’s nothing I can do. What should I do…?”

“Mother, please stop oppa. He’s in danger right now.”

Eun-bi blurted out something strange to the comforting Mrs. Jang. Mrs. Jang frowned and asked.

“…What do you mean by danger?”

“A company employee has latched onto oppa. She’s not even a proper woman; she’s a single mother with a child who is manipulating him. That’s why we broke up.”

Eun-bi said, tears streaming down her face.

Mrs. Jang was left speechless in shock.

“A single mother… did she approach oppa first, Mother? So oppa is playing around with her now.”

“……”

“What should I do, huh? Ugh, ugh….”

“……Single mother? Eun-bi, explain it clearly. Are you saying Ji-heon is involved with a single mother?”

Mrs. Jang asked again in a trembling voice. Eun-bi wiped her tears and nodded.

“Yes, she’s a single mother with a seven-year-old child. How dare she… Ugh… oppa must have some weakness, he doesn’t listen to my persuasion, Mother…”

“Who is she? What’s her name?”

“Lee Jeong-oh. The copywriter from Production Team 2, Lee Jeong-oh.”

Eun-bi choked out her answer, and Mrs. Jang’s eyes widened.

“Mother!”

Eun-bi shouted at Mrs. Jang, who had collapsed to the floor, her strength giving way.

Mrs. Jang’s mind went blank; she couldn’t process it.

Lee Jeong-oh.

No way, no way, could it be her…

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After work, Jeong-oh didn’t go home but headed to her mother’s restaurant instead. Upon opening the door to the restaurant, she saw a table that hadn’t been cleaned.

The rice on the table was almost untouched.

It must have been evidence that Cha Eun-bi and her friends had been there.

Tears fell from Jeong-oh’s eyes onto the white rice.

Wiping her tears resolutely, Jeong-oh began to clear the table. Throwing away the food scraps, she found a bag of food waste.

Three servings of the daily special. She felt guilty for just throwing away food worth about twenty thousand won and for the hurt it must have caused her mother.

After washing the dishes, taking out the food waste, cleaning every corner of the restaurant, and leaving a short note, she finally left the restaurant.

“Mom, from tomorrow, let’s forget everything and live happily, just like we always have.”

She smiled at the dark restaurant but couldn’t stop the tears.

Feeling sorrowful for having to stay by Ji-heon’s side. If it were just her own sorrow, she could endure it. But if her family were to suffer because of her…

Thinking back to the attempted kidnapping of Ye-na long ago and Eun-bi tormenting her family by coming to the restaurant.

A sense of frustration washed over her, realizing she had to silently endure all of this. The impulse to just leave everything behind and take her mother and Ye-na to the countryside surged within her.

“Ah. No, I can’t do that. I’m a copywriter. I have to keep working…”

Still, as she thought about various paths she hadn’t taken, her mood improved a little. It took her over an hour to walk home, lost in thought.

In the alley where she could see the villa building, Jeong-oh fixed her clothes and face. Looking at her reflection in her phone, her eyes were still puffy.

“Well, since the lights are off at home, I won’t get caught by Mom.”

Jeong-oh stepped forward with optimism. However, someone blocked her path. It was Ji-heon.

His car was parked in the alley. He must have been waiting for her for quite some time.

“…Why are you here?”

Without answering her question, he silently approached her.

Without realizing it, Jeong-oh took a step back. She had just managed to hold back her tears, and now she felt anxious that they might spill over

again. This was in front of her house.

“Director, should we talk tomorrow? I’m too tired today.”

“……”

“……There have been so many difficult things.”

“……”

“I’ll see you at the office tomorrow. I’ll go ahead.”

Jeong-oh took a few steps backward as if to flee, then turned completely around. But at that moment.

“Jeong-oh.”

He called her name just like the person she had loved seven years ago.

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Tears welled up in Jeong-oh’s throat again.

This is too much.

You know that calling me like that makes me feel miserable.

Jeong-oh turned her head and looked at him with resentment in her eyes. However, he didn’t seem the least bit sorry for what he had just said. Instead, his gaze seemed to blame her.

Yet it was also filled with a tender longing, a look that craved something.

Had he also been going through something difficult? Was that why he needed her?

Seeing that look of yearning made her heart ache.

What should she do in such a situation?

A man who had lived with a part of his heart missing, completely unaware of it.

A man approaching her, driven only by instinct, forgetting all the time they had spent together.

With a pitiful heart, Jeong-oh stepped closer to Ji-heon.

As she took a few steps forward, his face became clearer to her. Under the streetlight, his shadowed face was beautiful yet seemed sad.

Before she could ask why, he was the first to speak.

“Who is Ye-na’s father?”

“…….”

“Is it someone I know?”

Ji-heon clearly noticed Jeong-oh’s pupils dilating.

He felt anxious that she might evade the question and turn away again. It always happened like that: he chased after her, and she kept running away.

But that was probably because of the scars she carried from the seven years that weighed heavily on her heart. He could understand that a hundred times over, even if it couldn’t ease the burden of his own painful realization.

That time when I loved so deeply…

My lost memories. My everything.

The most precious thing.

What I had to protect.

“You only need to say one thing.”

Ji-heon, who had been quietly watching her, opened his mouth again.

“That child is my son.”

“…….”

“Ye-na is my daughter.”

Ch68 - Back to You (1)

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“You only need to say one thing.”

In the suffocating silence, he opened his mouth.

“That child is my son.”

His heavy voice sent a jolt through her heart.

It felt as if a helpless sigh was about to escape her lips, but Jeong-oh pressed her mouth shut.

Was it a certainty he had reached, or simply a desire to believe? She couldn’t read his mind.

Her heart, which had always raced toward him, now ached painfully. As she focused her eyes, they became even warmer.

“Ye-na is my daughter.”

Jeong-oh noticed that his gaze, which was fixed on her, trembled faintly. His voice was filled with longing and desperation.

“Say she’s our daughter.”

When she didn’t respond, Ji-heon spoke again. He tried to suppress his emotions, but waves of feeling churned within him.

All the same words.

Demanding an answer, Ji-heon’s doubts had turned into certainty.

There was only one answer she could accept.

Just say it.

If she would just answer, he would give her everything.

Had his desperate emotions reached her? Jeong-oh’s right hand rose to his cheek.

It was a soft and gentle touch that tickled his skin, but her lips remained tightly sealed. It seemed she wouldn’t ever provide the answer he desired. It felt as though she was trying to soothe him and escape the situation.

Anxious, Ji-heon took hold of her hand that was caressing his cheek.

“Say it.”

“…….”

“Say it. Please.”

Now, his voice had become a plea.

Looking at him, Jeong-oh’s heart ached as well. Her restless emotions churned continuously.

What made you this way?

Who drove this man to madness?

Who made him so desperate?

In her confusion, Jeong-oh had no way of knowing what had happened to him in the meantime.

Whether it was the truth or a lie, it seemed to matter little to him now.

He just wanted an answer.

She had to open her mouth for him.

Her eyes, weighing the burden of her answer, wandered like a lost child.

As always, she needed to think rationally. She had to make a realistic judgment.

His desire to have her entirely for himself might have led him to make a wrong decision. It could be a dangerous impulse to abandon everything just to grasp her.

Is it okay to say it? Is it really okay?

If he truly reached the truth, if he found out everything, she couldn’t confuse him any more by weighing his memories.

I’ve only been waiting to tell you the truth.

It was something she had desperately wanted too.

At twenty-three, she had now turned thirty.

Seven years had passed. She wanted to end this pain.

She wanted to be someone who wouldn’t deceive herself or her daughter.

With her resolve strengthened, Jeong-oh’s lips trembled heavily.

“Yes. She’s your child.”

After seven years. After a long time, she returned to him.

She spoke calmly, but her voice soon faltered.

Even under the streetlight, the red hue in his eyes grew larger. Despite receiving the answer he wanted.

Having pressed her for just one answer, he looked as though he was engulfed by shock, as if he hadn’t expected anything at all.

He seemed lost for words, as if he had lost his voice.

His lips slowly moved up and down, but no sound reached her ears.

Jeong-oh firmly reiterated the truth once more.

“Our… our child.”

It was a confession that was also difficult for her.

Her blurry eyes were filled with the pain on his face.

Huh…

Had she ever seen such a pitiful expression?

It was the saddest face she had encountered in her life.

Jeong-oh’s heart ached too.

The sorrow of knowing a truth she had long been unaware of was devastating.

It was the first time she had seen it. The man who always showed coldness, arrogance, confidence, and strength in front of her now wore a face that looked as if he had lost everything in life.

It was an expression of someone whose supporting world had crumbled. He seemed to have forgotten how to breathe.

Jeong-oh caught Ji-heon as he wobbled, as if his legs had given way. He too grasped her arms but couldn’t hold on. Just as he seemed to lean on her shoulder, he collapsed like someone who had lost the legs to support him. Jeong-oh sank down with him.

Huh, huh, huh…

From her shoulder came a breathless, gasping voice that sounded like he might suffocate at any moment. Jeong-oh could do nothing but hold him. His desperate breaths darkened the surrounding gloom even further.

No, this was crying.

Huh… Huhhhhh…

With her heart weighed down, as if her vocal cords had been stolen, his beast-like sobs soaked her shoulder.

He held her arms and shoulders so tightly it felt almost painful. In the midst of summer, his shoulders trembled as if he had encountered a bitter cold.

Not long ago, Jeong-oh had asked him how he had lived for those seven years. Didn’t losing his memory mean losing himself?

That was true. He had lived those seven years lost, as if breathing while his eyes were shut and ears were blocked.

I didn’t know.

I truly didn’t know…

In a world without you, there was nothing, so I didn’t even know how to find my way back to you.

I thought perhaps I had something precious, but I couldn’t confide in anyone, not a single soul.

There was no one, so I couldn’t say anything.

Time hadn’t only flowed for her and the child.

Ji-heon, who had been twenty-six, was now thirty-three.

He was still living in the prime of his youth, but that fact couldn’t turn back the time that had passed.

Ye-na at six years old…

He could no longer hold or touch that beautiful child.

He had lost everything that way.

So foolishly, the twenty-seven-year-old Jeong Ji-heon, who had known nothing.

Twenty-eight-year-old Jeong Ji-heon. Twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two empty years of Jeong Ji-heon.

The Jeong Ji-heon who could never return to those times screamed alongside him.

Ugh…

Ughhh…

Jung-oh held Ji-heon’s shoulder tighter. Unable to hold back, tears also flowed down Jung-oh’s cheeks. The still-trembling shoulders hinted at his despair.

In the midst of his heart-wrenching sobs, Jung-oh came to a sorrowful realization.

This man was truly alone.

Whom did his grief, his time, receive compensation from?

The seasons changed dozens of times, and each time, his beautiful daughter shone with a new light. She was the savior who pulled her mother from hell to heaven.

Ji-heon had never even thought about all the happiness Jung-oh experienced because of their daughter, the beauty and preciousness of that life.

So it was this person who walked through true hell…

Tears flowed ceaselessly.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Seven years ago, on the last day of the year.

Jung-oh boarded a train. She was going to spend New Year’s with her mother, Lee Guk-soon, who ran a restaurant in Gunsan, along with a friend.

As expected on such a day, the train was crowded. Each time she brushed past someone, Jung-oh’s hand instinctively went toward her belly.

Next to Jung-oh sat a woman who appeared to be in her thirties. Across the aisle, there was a child, about ten years old, and what seemed to be the child’s father.

Food constantly made its way into the child’s mouth. The child’s mother scolded him to stop eating so much, while the father, enjoying the special occasion, handed the child candy with a smile.

The family shared jokes and stories only they understood, laughing together the entire time. They were a beautiful, happy family—something she had never experienced and would never have.

Jung-oh stared blankly at the scene before turning her head away. Outside the window, she decided to press down on the passing scenery with her eyes. She could vaguely imagine her future, thinking she might never be able to go back.

After about three hours, the train arrived at Gunsan Station. Her mother, who had boasted around town that her smart and lovely daughter was coming from Seoul, was waiting with a bright expression.

“Lee Jung-oh!”

Her mother recognized her daughter immediately as she stepped off the train and waved her hand excitedly. However, the bright look soon faded. Her mother quickly noticed something strange about her daughter’s appearance.

Moreover, with each person she brushed past, Jung-oh's behavior appeared as if she were trying to protect something in her arms.

"Mom."

The smile on her face as she approached her mother was sad, and Guk-soon couldn't bring herself to respond with any expression.

Guk-soon took time off work, went straight to Seoul to tidy up her daughter's house, and then returned to Gunsan.

"You can stay here. You don't have to worry about anything. You can just stay healthy with me while we go to the hospital and then return to school later."

Thus began the new life of mother and daughter living together.

Guk-soon took care of Jung-oh fiercely. She was the only support Jung-oh could lean on. Knowing this, Guk-soon also wouldn't easily crumble.

"There's no problem. Just trust me."

If Jung-oh ever looked even a bit gloomy, Guk-soon would show even more spirited behavior.

Even if her heart was torn and she felt like running straight to the child's father, she never showed tears or spoke harshly in front of her daughter.

She protected her daughter with everything she could give. No matter how trapped Jung-oh was in darkness, to Guk-soon, Lee Jung-oh was her eternal sunshine.

Under her mother's care, Jung-oh gradually regained her true smile. Last winter, when it felt like she had lost everything, she realized that she actually had so much.

And then, the child was born.

Jung-oh learned that she could fall in love once more. She also understood the mother’s desire to become stronger for her child.

Jung-oh resolved to become a strong person who could tell her daughter, just like her mother, “Just trust me.”

A long time ago. A story that has now passed.

Before she knew it, everything had become a memory.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

In Ji-heon’s car.

Ji-heon shared with Jung-oh the events of the recent days and what he had remembered. He told her that they were in a romantic relationship and that they were expecting a child. That was all Ji-heon could recall, and Jung-oh felt a little disappointed.

However, she wanted to applaud his determination to trace back to her from seven years ago. The story of how he had planned to propose to her filled her heart with warmth.

Jung-oh also briefly shared her own stories from the past seven years. As time passed, she could now smile while reminiscing about the wandering and hardships she had faced back then. Though Ji-heon’s eyes remained moist as he looked at her.

After quietly listening to Jung-oh’s story, Ji-heon asked, “Why did we end up like that?”

Why did we break up? I would never let you go.

It was such a natural thing that Ji-heon’s doubts immediately turned in that direction.

“Why couldn’t you contact me? Who blocked our relationship?”

At Ji-heon’s precise question, Jung-oh’s eyes tightened with tension.

It was time to reveal the truth.

In a relatively calm voice, Jung-oh carefully began to speak.

“Can you listen to my story? It might be a bit shocking for you.”

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After Eun-bi left, a long time passed, but Yeong-mi’s convulsions did not stop.

“No way. It can’t be. It must not be.”

“It can’t be. It must be a namesake.”

Unable to sleep and pacing back and forth in the hallway, clutching her phone anxiously, Yeong-mi finally called Ji-heon’s secretary in the middle of the night.

[Yes, Madam.]

Ji-heon’s secretary responded immediately to Yeong-mi’s call.

“Secretary Yoon, are you off work? I’m sorry to bother you, but I have a question. Is there an employee named Lee Jung-oh at the company? Could you send me just one photo of that employee?”

[Yes. Understood.]

The secretary complied with Yeong-mi’s request without further comment.

A short while later, Yeong-mi’s phone notification chimed. It was a photo sent by the secretary. With trembling fingertips, she pressed the screen.

The photo appeared.

This is impossible!

Yeong-mi’s face froze as if she had met the Grim Reaper upon seeing the picture.

The girl from seven years ago. The daughter of a single mother.

The little girl who had been so obsessed with her son, Lee Jung-oh’s face was captured on the phone screen.

“Then that seven-year-old child is…!”

Ch69 - Back to You (2)

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In Ji-heon’s car.

When Ji-heon asked how they had ended up breaking up, Jung-oh told him everything that had happened on November 2, seven years ago, and the situation she had faced immediately after the hit-and-run accident the next day.

She even shared what “Ji-heon” had said to her when he contacted her fifteen days after the accident.

Jung-oh was anxious that he might not believe her, but it turned out to be unfounded. Ji-heon quickly understood her situation and harbored the same doubts. It was something that could be inferred.

“I never made that call. It must have been something arranged by my mother. It felt like she was hiding something.”

“…”

“Maybe she hired someone, or manipulated something.”

Carefully nodding, Jung-oh added her opinion.

“Come to think of it, it seems like your mother doesn’t know about Ye-na. If she did, she would have prevented me from joining Max Planning. Or maybe she would have stopped you.”

The use of the term “oppa” came out naturally. Even in this serious situation, Ji-heon found himself distracted by it. The casualness of her

speech felt both strange and endearing.

So this is what we were like.

Wanting to hug him and kiss him made her pause a few times before responding.

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Maybe after that phone call, she thought she had completely cut ties with me.”

Ji-heon nodded in agreement.

Jung-oh felt a little regret. If she had known that they would communicate so well, she would have shared everything much earlier.

But the fact that he had figured it out on his own was meaningful. Jung-oh decided that it was all for the best.

Without any time to indulge in sentimentality, Jung-oh pushed ahead with the conversation.

Ji-heon was a man in need of an orientation. She needed to quickly update him on everything that had happened so he could handle the situation effectively.

Jung-oh diligently moved on to the next topic.

“And there’s someone you need to be careful of.”

Seeing Jung-oh’s serious expression, Ji-heon immediately focused.

“Actually, I was going to meet with a lawyer. I was worried that if I told you the truth, I might lose Ye-na.”

“Seriously, Lee Jung-oh, you’re so thorough…”

“That kind of anxiety is completely understandable. Given what I’ve been through, how could I be at ease?”

Ji-heon sighed and scolded her, which made Jung-oh sulk a little.

Her reaction was indeed justified. Ji-heon could understand her a hundred or a thousand times. But understanding and feeling hurt were separate issues.

Jung-oh continued speaking.

“But then, when I went to the law firm for a consultation, I met with Lawyer Chae Eun-yeop.”

“Chae Eun-yeop, as in your oppa Chae Eun-bi?”

“Yeah. That guy approached me under false pretenses to set a trap.”

“…”

“It seemed like Eun-yeop knew that Ye-na is your child.”

Jung-oh recounted how she had found the law firm and the conversations she had had in that office.

Ji-heon, with his brow furrowed deeply, leaned back against the seat, looking confused.

“Eun-yeop is my friend. That’s how I knew Eun-bi too.”

“…”

“Of course, I don’t trust him completely. It’s shocking that he would do something like that.”

With his mother and friend involved, Jung-oh was worried that the facts she was revealing might shake his foundation. But it was a truth that needed to be addressed.

After a moment, he seemed to gather his thoughts and nodded.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“There’s more.”

“More?”

Ji-heon’s voice rose. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to hear it or that he was sulking about wanting to say something else. It was more that he felt pity for her, who had had to carry secrets alone all this time.

Jung-oh continued flatly.

“About two months ago, Ye-na almost got kidnapped in front of her academy.”

Ji-heon’s eyes widened. At the same time, Jung-oh noticed his fists clenching tightly, and she felt a surge of emotion as she recalled that moment.

She shared everything that had happened that day with Ji-heon and showed him the CCTV footage she had received from the police. After revealing the note that had been in Ye-na’s bag, she felt a bit relieved and considerably more secure.

Now she had an ally who would fight alongside her. Her nose tingled.

“This is why I couldn’t tell you earlier. I was worried you might try to intimidate me by revealing Ye-na’s existence beforehand.”

Ji-heon, looking somewhat hurt, clenched his jaw and gazed at her with teary eyes. While he looked quite cute, Jung-oh felt a bit exasperated.

“Think about my past! How could I trust you completely? Plus, Ji-heon, you were pretty rude back then!”

At her plea, Ji-heon hung his head and sighed.

She thought he was reflecting, but his response at the end of that sigh was:

“Let’s get married first.”

That was so typical of Ji-heon.

Joy, sorrow, relief, disappointment, anticipation, and regret—many emotions and thoughts surged like waves, washing away and being replaced with new feelings in this overwhelming night. The end result felt so clean and pleasant.

Jung-oh laughed, but Ji-heon didn’t smile.

“I’m not joking.”

“Take your time.”

“What do you mean? We have to do it right away.”

“Ye-na is the most important.”

“…”

“Becoming a family comes after Ye-na accepts it. Got it?”

Seeing the blank look on his face as if he had realized something significant, Jung-oh couldn’t help but smile again.

Ji-heon.

When you become a parent, the center of your life shifts. That’s something I can’t help.

Just like how the earth rotates, how the seasons change, how light refracts underwater. Just like how the wind blows from the sea to the land during the day, and from the land to the sea at night. Life changes so naturally.

The child gradually becomes the owner of my life. But I’ve come to think that it’s okay. I’ll keep growing stronger to protect my child.

Now that you know about the child, you'll understand my feelings too.

"If Ye-na accepts you, then you can prepare at that time."

With his eyes still moist, Ji-heon nodded sadly but sweetly.

"I want to figure out what Lawyer Eun-yeop knows and how much. I also want to know who the woman was that tried to kidnap our Ye-na."

"I'll look into it."

"Just act as usual so you won't be suspected. I'll think about how we should proceed."

Jung-oh meticulously organized the plan. Although her heart was warm, she knew she needed to keep her wits about her at such times.

"I'll talk to my mom tomorrow evening. Today is a bit much. It's late too."

"…"

"And I had a tough day with my mom today."

In truth, she wanted to share everything about Eun-bi visiting her mother's restaurant, but she held back. She felt that he would be confused enough as it was.

"Okay. Get inside quickly."

"Could you let go of my hand?"

Jung-oh playfully requested. While telling him to hurry inside as if everything was settled, he was still holding her hand tightly. It was so tight that her fingertips tingled.

So cold.

Ji-heon inwardly grumbled and slowly released her hand. He didn't have any memories of their relationship from seven years ago, but he could guess

a few things.

He must have regretted every time he broke up with her. So it probably took him quite a while to let go of her hand.

Let’s promise not to break up again.

He couldn’t bring himself to say it for fear that tears would show again, so he let Jung-oh go. She waved as she got out of the car. Ji-heon looked at her and smiled.

“Oppa.”

Just before she opened the villa’s entrance door, Jung-oh called out to him.

“Now, don’t forget me.”

Her warm plea, carried by the summer night air, brushed against his heart. Ji-heon immediately rushed over and hugged her.

Jung-oh, enveloped in his broad arms, stretched out her own arms to embrace him.

Memories may fade, but one hot feeling remained. The heart that called out Jung-oh still beat warmly for the same person.

Let’s promise not to break up again.

.....

It felt like too much had happened for her to even sleep that night.

Joeng woke up to the clattering sounds in the kitchen after only a few hours of sleep. Getting up, she went straight into the kitchen.

“Oh, you’re up already? You could’ve slept in a bit longer.”

Seeing Joeng approaching, her mother, Guksun, spoke.

“Didn’t you work overtime again last night? You came home pretty late.”

Joeng could sense the sadness in her mother’s voice, as she had stayed in her room, quietly wiping away tears, unable to come out when she heard her daughter return home.

“I didn’t work overtime, just met up with someone.”

“You’re diligent, as usual.”

The smell of doenjang stew quickly filled the kitchen as Guksun stirred the pot. For seven years, Joeng had shared these quiet mornings with her mother. Seven years of consistency — how could she ever fully express her gratitude for her mother, who held down this place so steadfastly?

“Mom.”

Joeng went behind her mother and hugged her gently.

“Mom, how about we hang out together today?”

“Don’t you have work?”

“I’ll take the day off.”

“It hasn’t been that long since you last took a day off. Keep this up, and they’ll fire you.”

“Even if they do, you’ll still feed me, right?”

“How could I possibly feed you, with you eating like an elephant?”

“Geez, an elephant?”

“No, you’re right, not an elephant. With all the meat you eat, it’s even worse.”

Her mother’s voice held no trace of sadness. She was always a strong woman, careful not to show any weakness in front of her daughter. Joeng

felt like the luckiest person in the world to be born the daughter of Lee Guksun.

“Let’s be happy. And stay healthy.”

“What, are you planning to quit your job and become a singer?”

“Oh, come on, you’re killing the mood, Mom.”

“When would I have time for mood? I barely have time to set the table.”

At her mother’s cynical response, Joeng sighed and released her hug. The nonchalant attitude of her mother tugged at Joeng’s heart and yet, at the same time, gave her strength.

Fueled by a hearty breakfast, Joeng and Yena began their journey to start the day.

“See you later, Grandma!” Yena chirped.

“Mom, we’re heading out now. We’ll see you tonight,” Joeng added cheerfully.

Guksun waved to the adorable pair.

“Take care, and my little one, watch out for cars.”

“Okay!”

Joeng held Yena’s hand as they descended the stairs. Since the preschool bus didn’t come down to their neighborhood, she took Yena to the main road every morning before heading to work herself.

“We’re early today,” Joeng commented, glancing at her phone to check the time as they stepped out of the building.

“Mom, look over there,” Yena said, pointing ahead.

Joeng looked up to see Jiheon approaching them.

He greeted Yena first, while Joeng, still surprised, skipped a greeting and asked him directly, “Did you sleep okay?”

“Thanks to you.”

Was that a yes or a no?

Joeng frowned, puzzled by his ambiguous answer, but Jiheon simply watched Yena quietly for a moment.

There was no way he had slept. After arriving home late at night, he’d tossed and turned, then finally got up early to wait again outside Joeng’s building. His feelings were racing — excitement, pain, a mix of longing and gratitude.

He struggled to remember the events from seven years ago, but there was nothing else. Instead, he found himself recalling the recent days, the day he had seen Joeng again for the first time, and the first time he had met Yena. So many regrets crowded in.

He wanted to hug Yena right now.

Without knowing Jiheon’s inner turmoil, Yena asked him bluntly, “Why are you here, Mister?”

“I came to see you, Yena.”

“…”

“I’m going to come every day from now on.”

Although she’d asked with a pout, her lips turned up slightly, showing she didn’t mind his answer. But she still kept her air of feigned indifference as she replied.

“Well, I still can’t play with you. I have to go to preschool.”

“I see. Then let’s play together on a day you don’t have preschool.”

Jiheon extended his hand instead of hugging her. This time, without hesitation, Yena took his hand. The small, tender grip of her fingers sent a tingly warmth up to his chest. His eyes grew misty for a moment.

Joeng, our child is truly beautiful.

The memories he thought were lost began to resurface.

…Back then, I was on my way to propose. Just thinking about the baby made me feel something I'd never felt before, like my heart was tingling with a whole new set of emotions.

"Ah…."

He let out a soft sigh, careful that neither Joeng nor Yena would hear.

I will walk with you, little one.

I will take you out to step on freshly fallen snow.

I will show you the stars as they rise.

I will teach you how to ride a bicycle.

Hold your hand.

Protect you.

Look into your eyes and tell you I love you.

Ch70 - A Dark Past

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“Don’t cry in front of the kid.”

Jeong-oh quietly warned Ji-heon, hoping Yena wouldn’t notice.

Watching Ji-heon, his eyes welling up like a father sending his daughter off to get married, even though it was just a daycare bus, amused Jeong-oh.

But Ji-heon ignored her warning, still struggling to compose himself, so she threw in a sharper jab.

“Stop overreacting. You look like some scammy stepfather.”

That seemed to do it. He snapped out of it, his face returning to normal.

Soon, the bus arrived.

“Mom, I’m off!”

Yena, guided by her teacher, sweetly waved goodbye, and Ji-heon, feeling another surge of fatherly emotion, looked on with a pink nose. He couldn’t help it. Every look, every movement, every gesture from his daughter filled his chest with pride and bittersweet joy. Jeong-oh waved as she whispered to him,

“She’s just going to daycare, not off to military service.”

With that wake-up call, Ji-heon managed to keep it together—barely enough not to look too odd. He still looked a little silly to her, but she kept it to herself.

As the bus doors closed, Yena found her seat, and the bus started down the road. Ji-heon stood there, watching until the bus faded from view, the goodbye feeling like a bittersweet reunion.

Although she'd teased him, Jeong-oh felt she could understand Ji-heon's heart. Who could blame him for rushing over so early in the morning, just to catch a glimpse of her?

"How are you feeling? Can you drive and head to work okay?"

"I'm fine. Really good, actually."

"Good. See you at work. I'll take the subway."

"Let's go together. Stay by my side."

Seeing that he was okay, she waved and started to go, but he caught her hand.

"You being close gives me a sense of…a spark."

"……"

"I feel like I'm about to remember everything."

Ji-heon wasn't lying. Just moments earlier, he'd remembered fragments from seven years ago. Yes, the thoughts he'd had about his yet-to-be-born child were indeed about Yena, the heart of an expectant father eager to show her the world and give her everything.

She couldn't refuse when he used memory as collateral. Still, as he held her hand and walked to his car, she set some boundaries.

"I'll get off close to the office. Where no one's around."

"We can say we just happened to meet."

"Yeah, I'm sure everyone will buy that."

“……”

“You have no idea what kind of rumors could start. Please be careful.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just tell them?”

Suddenly, Jeong-oh stopped in her tracks and blocked his path.

“No way. Think about why we’re in this mess.”

Her eyes, large and clear, met his firmly.

“If you hadn’t had that fake fling with Chae Eun-bi, things wouldn’t be like this.”

Despite herself, Jeong-oh couldn’t hold back anymore.

I’m still disappointed in you.

Even though we weren’t together, I hated seeing you live with no sense of purpose, no dedication.

“How could you live so irresponsibly? You shouldn’t have lived like that.”

Even if I wasn’t there, you shouldn’t have lived that way.

Ji-heon pressed his lips together, thoughts floating around his head.

Why does she make me feel so helpless?

Is this my true self? Did I use to live completely wrapped around her finger?

Now, am I destined to live this way? Maybe I should start making amends for those careless seven years.

“…I know I can’t change the past, but I’ll do better from now on.”

She let out a slight snort at his serious face. A mischievous thought urged her to tease him a little more.

“Wait a minute. Come to think of it, I think you said you’d ‘deal with’ my ex. Was it that you’d break every bone he had?”

“…….”

“Hey, Ji-heon, why are you avoiding my eyes?”

“…”

“Huh? Come on, speak up.”

“…Actually, if I recall, you once called me a weirdo?”

“Did I? When?”

“You did. Last Thursday!”

“Well, you called my ex a psycho. So there.”

“……”

Oooh. Ji-heon tried to banter back, but he didn’t have much of a leg to stand on. He couldn’t have known that he’d regret every insult he’d thrown at her ex, but now he wished he could go back and erase it all.

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After sending off her daughter and granddaughter, Guksun bustled around and got ready to go to work at her restaurant.

She regretted leaving without cleaning up the night before. It was probably crawling with bugs and stinking by now, she thought as she opened the door, worried about what she’d find.

Instead, she froze, her mouth falling open.

“What on earth…?”

It looked as if fairies had visited overnight, cleaning the restaurant until it was spotless. She couldn’t feel happy, though—her heart sank with a pang of guilt.

She knows. My daughter must’ve found out.

That’s why she was so affectionate this morning.

She could almost picture Jeong-oh, weary from another late night at work, coming to tidy up her mother’s mess. She sighed, thinking about last night.

When a mother starts to receive help from her child, it’s a bittersweet feeling.

She’d hoped she could be her daughter’s pillar of support just a bit longer.

Already, her daughter was stepping ahead of her, moving steadily toward the sun.

As proud as she was of the woman her daughter had become, she couldn’t help wishing Jeong-oh would slow down just a little. Long enough that she could still do a bit more for her.

With a sigh, she spotted something on the table nearby. There was a folded paper with a handwritten note.

To my dearest mom.

It was a letter from her daughter. As Guksun unfolded it, she read each word slowly.

To my dearest mom.

There was a time I acted out and told you I was tired. But I wasn’t tired at all—I was just being a kid because I knew you’d let me.

For that, I’m so sorry.

In my next life, I'd love to come back as your mom, though I'm sure you'd say no.

But for now, let's make this life as happy as it can be.

I love you, Mom.

Reading it, Guksun thought she could almost hear her daughter's voice.

The simple words, written so much like her daughter would speak, contained so much love.

There was a small addendum at the bottom in tiny writing, as though her daughter thought she might not be able to read it.

- I'll never forgive that witch Chae Eun-bi.

Don't worry, Mom. From now on, I'll only fight battles I know I'll win.

Just wait. An incredible happiness is waiting for us.

Whether it was meant to make her laugh or relieve her anger, she wasn't sure.

But stroking the light blue paper, Guksun felt as broad as the sky.

Whatever incredible happiness lay ahead, she hoped it would come a little slower.

My sweet daughter, I don't need a great happiness. Just like this, I'm more than happy.

Realizing she had no reason to feel down, Guksun straightened up.

She used to worry about her daughter, wondering if she might be shedding tears somewhere she couldn't see. Now her daughter had grown up into a wonderful adult who even carried the burden of her mother's worries.

Her precious daughter, who made her feel both fragile and strong at the same time.

Jeong-oh, I hope I can be by your side in my next life, no matter what.

Whether as your mother, a bird that sings beside you all day, or a tree that grows alongside you.

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Meanwhile, Eun-bi went to work, made her appearance, and then ducked out under the pretense of “outside business.” She couldn’t bear to be in the office anymore, as her colleagues’ attitudes had shifted.

It was all because of Jeong-oh.

After leaving the office, Eunbi headed to Eunyeop’s law office.

“Oppa, I’m going to sue her. Write up a complaint for me.”

Barging into his office, Eunbi demanded he draft a complaint. Annoyed by her abrupt request, Eunyeop kept his eyes on the documents in front of him, showing no reaction. Eunbi provided more details to try and get his attention.

“Eunjo hit me last night. She slapped me right across the face.”

Eunyeop clenched his teeth, looking at her fiercely. “I told you to stay out of it.”

“How could you be so indifferent?” Eunbi felt hurt by his cold response.

“I just told you I was assaulted by Eunjo. When your sister tells you she was hit, isn’t it normal to ask if she’s okay or find out what happened?”

“Do you think Eunjo would hit you for no reason? You must have done something to seriously provoke her.”

Eunyeop’s impression of Eunjo was that of a composed and intelligent woman. Though nervous while meeting him, she expressed herself clearly and assertively and appeared perceptive, not easily intimidated.

She wasn’t someone to underestimate.

Throughout her story, he quickly realized the “Ms. C,” the woman who had been harassing Eunjo, was actually his sister, Eunbi. Hearing this, he grew angrier by the moment, feeling his sister was woefully simple-minded and lacking in common sense. She had no practical value at all.

He even thought, “I wish Eunjo were my sister instead.”

“Fine. If you won’t help me, there are other lawyers I can go to.”

Eunbi, seething with resentment at her brother, scoffed as she prepared to leave. With her hand on the door handle, she threw a parting shot.

“Oh, by the way…”

Thinking he ought to know, and eager to show that she could handle matters on her own without him, she added:

“I told Mom directly. About Eunjo, that is.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told Jiheon’s mom that Eunjo’s a single mom with a seven-year-old kid trying to seduce him…”

Smack!

Before she could finish, Eunbi was sent sprawling as Eunyeop slapped her hard, knocking over a stack of documents and leaving the office in chaos.

It was far worse than Eunjo’s slap.

In shock, Eunbi cradled her stinging cheek with one hand as she looked up at him, bewildered.

“O-Oppa?”

“Don’t call me that. You’re nothing but trash.”

“…”

“What did you do?”

“…”

“What did you think you were doing?”

With his face flushed red and looking utterly monstrous, he glared at her, fury blazing in his eyes as if he might strangle her right then and there.

“You just handed Youngmi her own granddaughter on a silver platter! A granddaughter she didn’t even know existed!”

“W-What does that even mean…?”

Far more shaken than by the slap, Eunbi felt a cold chill settle over her.

A granddaughter?

Eunbi’s eyes began to fill with tears.

“If you’re too dumb to understand, you should just stay out of it.”

“…”

“Without being able to marry Jiheon, you’re nothing but garbage. Worthless trash. Not even worth living.”

Ch71 - Bring That Guy Over

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It was a lazy afternoon without any meetings.

Jungoh continued with her work, occasionally stretching her neck to glance over at Eunbi's desk. Eunbi, who had left in the morning for an external meeting, still hadn't returned. Several times, she heard An Chansub, the Team Leader of Production Team 1, asking about her whereabouts.

'She's probably wandering around, threatening to sue someone.'

Was she off tattling to her brother? If so, whose side would Cha Eun Yeob take?

Of course, Cha Eun Yeob would side with Cha Eunbi, not Jungoh. After all, he'd approached her under the guise of Ha Jin Chul, so once he'd obtained the information he needed, he would surely cut off contact.

'I'll only get to see Cha Eun Yeob maybe once or twice more, and that's if I'm lucky and brace myself for it.'

As Jungoh pondered how to mess with Cha Eun Yeob, Deputy Manager Park Young Gwang approached her.

"Assistant Manager Lee, Director Jung wants you to come to his office."

"Oh, sure. Got it."

Curious about why Jiheon was summoning her, Jungoh rose from her seat. Kihoon swiveled his chair to face her and asked, "Want me to come with you?"

“No, it’s okay. I’ll go alone. Thanks.”

Jungoh smiled at Kihoon. Team Leader Sung Miran, who had been watching the scene blankly, quickly turned away when her eyes met Jungoh’s.

Yesterday, there had been an incident in the restroom. Jungoh had hit Eunbi, who then criticized her harshly. Because of that, her colleagues seemed to be even more wary of her. The only person treating her the same as before was Deputy Manager Go Eun Joo.

“I’ll be back.”

She quietly informed her team and left for the office. The secretary, who usually sat outside the office, was absent.

Knock, knock.

“Director, it’s Lee Jungoh.”

“Yes.”

The response seemed oddly close to the door. She tilted her head in confusion as she opened it.

Then, swoosh. As soon as she opened the door, an arm extended from inside and pulled her in, just like that night in the Melbourne hotel.

Click.

Jiheon, embracing her, reached behind her to close the door. Although his arms felt warm and comforting, she was a bit anxious about his behavior.

“The secretary’s going to notice right away.”

“Secretary Yoon’s on leave today.”

“Don’t call me to your office for no reason.”

“It’s not for no reason. You’re the most important reason.”

With his head resting on her shoulder, Jiheon murmured as he tightened his hold, preventing her from pulling away.

“You’re suffocating me.”

“I’m suffocating too.”

“Right? So you feel suffocated too?”

“No, you’re holding me so tightly I can’t breathe.”

As she struggled to push his arms off her, Jiheon, now slightly pushed away, gave her a displeased look.

“Director, there’s an order to things. If it’s out of order, people feel uncomfortable.”

Staring at him with piercing eyes, she continued.

“Our situation involves personal entanglements, so it’s perfect gossip material for people. We need to handle it properly, and we need to let some time pass.”

“But Yeona’s waiting.”

“Even so, rushing things isn’t the answer.”

“…….”

“Besides, who knows how long your whims will last?”

“What?”

Jiheon had been about to nod compliantly despite her rebuke, but now he was stunned.

“Do you really think my feelings might change?”

“You never know what might happen.”

Though he wanted to warn her not to change either, he couldn’t argue against her words. He couldn’t deny that the biggest fault lay in him for failing to remember her for seven years.

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

“…….”

“I won’t change. Ever.”

He spoke sincerely, and she knew he wouldn’t. This man, who had approached her with the same instincts as seven years ago—how could he ever change?

“Fine. I’ll trust you. But you need to set an example. Work hard, not haphazardly. You’re sitting in the Director’s chair, so act like a true leader.”

If she didn’t keep him in check, he’d probably create a space for her right next to the secretary or even in a corner of his office. She quickly distanced herself.

“And Director, please watch your terms of address at the office. Don’t call me over for trivial things.”

“But seeing you helps me remember better….”

“Let’s just work when we’re at work, understood?”

The seven years they’d been apart had changed Jungoh, not Jiheon. She had firmly taken hold of her reason.

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The day passed more peacefully than the day before.

Jungoh also left work early and went to help at Guksun’s restaurant. There were quite a few customers today, so it wasn’t until after 8 p.m. that

they managed to close up. By the time they finished cleaning up and she got home, it was already past 9.

After putting Yeona to bed, Jungoh joined Guksun in the living room, sitting beside her. Guksun, who was folding laundry, glanced at her and asked flatly, “Why? Hungry again?”

“Mom, do you think I’m some kind of eating machine?”

Jungoh grumbled, picking up a towel. Neither of them mentioned the incident at the restaurant last night or the letter from Jungoh. There were things they both understood without needing words—a solid love that required no explanations.

But what she was about to talk about now was something that would never be known unless said out loud.

“Mom. I have something to tell you.”

Carefully folding a towel and stacking it neatly, Jungoh began, her tone cautious.

“Why are you kneeling like that? Trying to scare me?”

Seeing her tense up and adjust her position, Guksun frowned.

“You didn’t quit your job, did you?”

“Oh, Mom. Why would I quit?”

“Then what is it? What’s the problem now?”

“…I met Yeona’s dad.”

Her mother’s expression, which had initially reflected mild annoyance, changed as her mouth fell open wider with her daughter’s confession. But, as always, Madam Lee Guksun didn’t get too agitated.

“…Are you okay?”

First and foremost, she wanted to know if her daughter was alright.

“Of course, I’m fine.”

“What kind of man is he? Is he doing well?”

“Yeah. He’s doing great.”

Even at the news that he was doing exceptionally well, Guksun’s frown didn’t ease.

She thought back to the man who had visited the restaurant with Jungoh a few days ago. She’d heard he was a company director, but something about the way he looked at her daughter seemed unusual.

Surely, it couldn’t be him.

“That director who came to the restaurant that day. It’s him.”

She had hoped otherwise, but alas…

Sigh! Guksun let out a deep breath.

Jungoh could see the rage boiling up in her mother’s eyes. The neatly folded T-shirt in her mother’s hands was now thoroughly wrinkled.

Jiheon, if you’d been here now, you might have ended up with a broken bone or two…

Watching her mother’s expression carefully, Jungoh began to explain in a soft voice.

“There’s a story behind it. He has amnesia.”

“…”

“He didn’t know I was pregnant. He had completely forgotten me.”

“Forgotten? For seven years?”

“Yes, seven years.”

“That scoundrel. How does anyone forget something like that? Are you sure it’s true?”

“Yes, I checked everything.”

“Oh, good heavens.”

“….”

“Good heavens… good heavens…”

As if she were standing in the middle of an earthquake, Guksun placed both hands on the floor to steady herself. Seeing her daughter’s face, blinking nervously, only made her feel more pity.

How hard must it have been for this child? How much had she suffered?

The thought of not even being able to fully understand her pain made her heart ache.

“Bring him over. Tomorrow, right away.”

Rising to her feet, Guksun straightened her back, her voice stern.

“Tell him to prepare himself for a good scolding.”

After issuing her command, Guksun headed toward the door. Startled, Jungoh rose and asked, “Where are you going?”

“To cut a switch.”

“At this hour? Wait, are you going to hit someone’s child?”

“It’s an initiation.”

“….”

“If he made my daughter cry, he should be ready to get hit.”

“Mom, I didn’t cry blood!”

Without so much as a scoff at her daughter’s rebuttal, her mother disappeared into the night.

Having narrowly cleared one hurdle, Jungoh immediately called Jiheon.

Ring.
“Yes, hello?”

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Jiheon, who had been anxiously waiting for her call, answered almost immediately.

“I told my mom.”

“What did she say?”

Ba-dum, ba-dum…

“She said to bring you tomorrow.”

Phew…

Releasing a breath of relief, Jiheon leaned back in his chair, secretly exhaling.

“But don’t relax just yet. You might get hit, and it might be with a switch, so you might want to dress in thick clothes.”

Unable to see her expression, he couldn’t tell if she was joking or serious. Calming his nerves, she added one more hopeful suggestion.

“After we talk with my mom, let’s also tell Yeona. Tomorrow.”

His heart began to pound again.

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The next afternoon, in front of the Go Academy.

The daycare bus arrived, and Yeona stepped off.

With Jiseo pregnant, Yeona had resumed taking the daycare bus to and from school. Her academy teacher, who had been waiting, greeted her with a warm smile.

With her hair pulled up like a ballerina and wearing a pretty dress, Yeona looked like a princess.

“Hello, teacher!”

“You look pretty today, Yeona.”

“Yes. I heard we have a guest coming.”

“What kind of guest?”

“I don’t know.”

Even as she answered, Yeona thought she might have an idea.

That morning, the “uncle” had visited her again—her mom’s director.

Unlike usual, when he said “See you tomorrow” at the bus, he had said “See you later.”

‘Uncle seems to want to be close with Mom.’

Does Mom like him too?

If so, then today’s guest must be him.

Feeling a twinge of disappointment, Young Detective Yeona took her teacher’s hand and entered the academy building.

“Let’s take the elevator.”

The teacher guided her into the arriving elevator. Yeona stepped in alongside her teacher.

Just as the elevator doors were about to close, a hand slid between them, and they opened again. A tall, poised, middle-aged woman stepped inside.

Her clothing and accessories looked expensive, and Yeona’s teacher thought the woman didn’t seem to match the building’s environment.

The woman gazed intently at Yeona, who was holding her teacher’s hand tightly.

So, it’s you. You’re Yeona.

“What floor are you going to?”

Since the woman hadn’t pressed a button, the teacher asked first. The woman, as if suddenly recalling her destination, pressed a button. Yeona, standing close to it, took a step back, but the woman’s ornate bracelet caught on her hair.

“Ow!”

Yeona yelped.

“Oh, dear!”

The woman quickly pulled her bracelet away, flustered. It had happened too fast for the teacher beside her to intervene.

“Ouch!”

Yeona let out an even louder cry.

Her neatly styled hair that Jungoh had so carefully combed that morning was now a mess. Realizing her hair was in disarray, Yeona’s face twisted in dismay.

“Oh dear, your pretty hair is all ruined. What a shame…”

The woman, looking embarrassed, pulled out some money from her wallet. It was a fifty-thousand won bill.

“Sweetie, I’m so sorry. Would this help?”

“No, it’s okay. I can just fix her hair again myself.”

The teacher stepped between the woman and Yeona, speaking politely.

“Oh, I’m really sorry. Sweetie, I’m sorry.”

Since the woman repeatedly apologized, neither the teacher nor Yeona could hold a grudge.

“It’s okay,”

Yeona answered firmly, remembering how she’d been taught to forgive those who sincerely apologized.

When the elevator doors opened, Yeona and her teacher exited first. The woman waved at Yeona, gripping her bracelet tightly.

A little later, the elevator stopped on an upper floor, but the woman didn’t get off. Instead, she pressed the button for the first floor again.

After exiting on the first floor, she climbed into a car waiting in front of the building.

“The child is cute,”

Youngmi muttered, sighing as she gazed at the building from inside the car. Then, she pulled out a hair strand from her bracelet, placing it in an envelope and handing it to Choi, the driver.

“Drop me off at home, then deliver this to the address written on the envelope. I’ve already informed the staff, so make sure you get it there on time.”

“Yes, madam.”

With that, Driver Choi started the car.

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Eunyeop waited nervously for Driver Choi. Ten minutes passed, and soon she spotted him approaching.

“Driver.”

“Yes, Attorney.”

Eunyeop pointed to a child’s electric toy car behind her.

“Oh, it looks brand new.”

“My nephew barely used it. It’s practically new. I hope the child likes it.”

“I’m sure they’ll love it. Thank you.”

Eunyeop had put in a lot of effort for this meeting. She knew, from brief conversations with Driver Choi, that he had a child, so she’d offered him her nephew’s electric toy car. This let her monitor Lady Jang’s actions closely.

After confirming Yeona’s existence through Eunbi, Lady Jang would undoubtedly act right away. And sure enough, she had gone straight to Yeona’s Go academy.

“You’ll probably need to load it into the trunk; would you like some help?”

“Oh, no need, Attorney.”

Driver Choi lifted the large toy car with ease, looking pleased. Meanwhile, Eunyeop took a quick glance at the front passenger seat of the car.

Everything was in place. Next to the driver’s seat, she spotted a white envelope. Swiftly, she opened the door, grabbed the envelope, examined its

contents, and switched it with an identical one she’d brought along.

It’s done.

A gleam of triumph sparkled in Eunyeop’s eyes as she completed her plan.

Ch72 - First Greeting

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When Yeona arrived at the academy, she carefully re-tied her tangled hair. Though her hair was now neatly arranged, Yeona felt unsettled throughout the class.

As usual, Dobin, who was just playing with the Go stones, was met with Yeona's sudden question.

"If you could have any amount of money you wanted, how much would you want?"

"A thousand won."

Yeona thought the question would be difficult to answer, but Dobin responded instantly, as if his answer hadn't gone through any filter.

"Why?"

"If I get more than a thousand won, my mom takes it away."

His answer made sense, so Yeona nodded quietly.

Why do people keep giving me fifty-thousand won bills? It's not like I can even keep that much money.

And why don't I feel good when I get money? If I had money, I could ask Mom to buy the toys I like.

"Why do people keep giving me fifty-thousand won?"

“Fifty thousand? Who gave it to you?”

“A stranger.”

“Then you should tell your mom.”

“Even if I didn’t take it?”

“If it were me, I’d say something. Fifty thousand won is like five thousand one-thousand won bills. That’s a lot of money.”

“It’s not five thousand, it’s fifty.”

Dobin, who was trying to show off, immediately quieted down after Yeona’s correction.

“…Even so, fifty thousand won is a lot of money, so I’d tell.”

Yeona nodded as well.

“Yeah, I should tell.”

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Eunbi couldn’t even go to work; she was bedridden.

‘That little kid is actually Jung Jiheon’s biological daughter.’

Please, let my brother be wrong. Let it be a lie.

But the more she recalled the past, the more despairing it felt.

From the beginning, Jung Jiheon and Lee Jungoh had always been strange.

Jiheon was obsessed with Jungoh, almost like a beast imprinted with her name in his DNA, and though Jungoh seemed to avoid him, she acted with a certain confidence, as if she had something to rely on. And then—

“Director Jung doesn’t look like my dad but like my ex-boyfriend.”

She had even made that remark in front of both her and Jiheon, hinting to the amnesiac Jiheon.

So that’s what it meant.

‘Lee Jungoh, are you using a child as leverage to get close to Jiheon?’

The realization that all of this was part of Jungoh’s scheme, her carefully crafted plan, sent shivers through Eunbi’s body.

And yet, she couldn’t expose the cunning fox, and it made her feel helpless and frustrated.

While she was crying under the covers, she heard the front door open.

“Still lying around like this?”

Last night, Eunbi had sobbed in this man’s arms. It had been a miserable day—losing her boyfriend, being treated as if she didn’t exist at work, and even getting slapped by her older brother, leaving her feeling utterly alone in the world.

He was the only one she could rely on. When she cried and poured her heart out to him, he comforted her by coming to her house.

In the morning, he made breakfast for her, went to work, and then returned to her apartment in the afternoon.

“Babe, I feel like I’m going to die from exhaustion.”

Eunbi, her eyes swollen from crying, reached her arms out to him, seeking comfort. He walked over and hugged her tightly.

“That child stole everything from me. I have no future anymore. They’ll kick me out of the company. There’s no one left by my side.”

“What are you talking about? I’m here.”

He hugged her close, consoling her with comforting words.

“Everything will work out. In the end, everything will go the way you want.”

Sniffle, sniffle.

“You know they say heaven helps those who help themselves. Times like these, you need to stay strong, okay?”

Sniffle, sniffle.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry.”

As he spoke kindly, she felt strangely stronger, like his words had an oddly calming effect.

Just as she finished wiping her tears, her phone buzzed. It was Eunyeop calling.

“It’s my brother. What should I do?”

“Answer it. Maybe he wants to apologize.”

Knowing about Eunyeop hitting her, he urged her to answer. Eunbi picked up the call, her heart racing.

“Hello.”

[“Why are you answering so late?”]

The tone of his voice made it clear he wasn’t calling to apologize, and her heart sank. She sighed quietly, and Eunyeop continued his questioning.

[“You didn’t go around causing trouble today, did you?”]

“What are you talking about? I couldn’t even go to work.”

[“Well, maybe it’s better you didn’t.”]

The harshness of his words drove her remaining tears away.

[“Listen carefully. You’re better off doing nothing at all. That’s what’s best for you, understand?”]

The one-sided advice abruptly ended as the call was cut off.

Eunbi stared blankly for a moment but quickly regained her senses.

It seemed her brother was preparing something. He sounded extremely certain.

Surely, her brother had a plan.

Thinking about it, Lady Jang was not the kind of person who would ever accept Lee Jungoh. But Lee Yena, on the other hand…

If Eunyeop pulled some strings to tie up custody and guardianship of Yena, preventing Jungoh from getting close…

Somehow, it felt like Eunyeop could pull it off.

“I… I think I can rely on my brother.”

That thought slowly lifted her spirits. She felt grateful that she had taken the call.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

“Ah, ah, ah.”

Jiheon cleared his throat several times.

“Hello, Mother. Hello, Yeona.”

This was Director Jung’s office, where even the typically arrogant Jiheon was practicing polite greetings to the air.

After several rounds of practice, he stood in front of the mirror, looking himself over. His tense face appeared slightly stern. No matter how much he tried to relax, it wasn’t working.

Knock knock.

“Yes.”

Upon hearing the knock, Jiheon responded, and Seunggyu peeked his face through the crack of the opened door.

Even though Jiheon recognized Seunggyu’s face, he didn’t move away from the mirror.

“What are you doing?”

Seunggyu asked blankly, surprised by Jiheon’s unfamiliar action of staring at himself in the mirror.

With a faint smile that was barely there, Jiheon asked Seunggyu, “How does my expression look?”

“Why are you acting strange? Did someone say you look scary again?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“…”

“I’ll tell you after today.”

“What the….”

Seunggyu muttered softly, a bit disgruntled, as he sat down on the sofa. He actually had something he wanted to talk about too.

“Did you hear? Two days ago, there was a fight in your division.”

“What fight?”

“You didn’t hear?”

“…”

“There was a scuffle in the restroom between Deputy Manager Lee Jeong-oh and Manager Chae Eunbi. They say they heard the sound of Deputy Manager Lee slapping Manager Chae.”

Jiheon’s carefully composed smile faded, and his face hardened. Jeong-oh hadn’t mentioned anything about it.

Two days ago was the day Jiheon learned that Yena was his daughter. That night, he went to see Jeong-oh and spent a long time with her, but she hadn’t said anything about a fight.

Now that he thought about it, just before he asked Jeong-oh about Yena, she had mentioned that she’d had a rough day.

“Did Deputy Manager Lee tell you nothing about it?”

“Not at all. Do you know what happened?”

“Apparently, Manager Chae said something really harsh to Deputy Manager Lee, calling her a single mother as an insult. She also mentioned her mother and her child. The insults were pretty severe. Everyone is shocked, saying they never knew Manager Chae was like that.”

Jiheon clenched his fist tightly below his waist.

“If Deputy Manager Lee didn’t bring it up, don’t act like you know. She must be having a hard time as it is.”

“I’ve already heard about it, so it’s hard to pretend I don’t know.”

“…then don’t say it was me who told you.”

At Seunggyu’s timid request, Jiheon managed a faint smile.

He was thankful to have a friend working at the same company. Without Seunggyu, he would’ve been in the dark, clueless as usual.

“Thanks for telling me.”

“No big deal.”

“And you…”

“Yeah?”

“You really made a good choice marrying her. Do you know that?”

“I do, but I didn’t need to hear it from you.”

“Yeah. Sorry for overstepping.”

“What’s up with you, Director Jiheon? You’re acting strange today.”

At Jiheon’s different expressions and actions, Seunggyu frowned in confusion.

“What’s strange?”

“Is something going on today? You seem like you’re up to something.”

At his question, Jiheon finally gave a brief answer.

“I’m meeting Ms. Lee Jeong-oh’s mother today.”

Seunggyu’s jaw dropped.

“What? That’s so fast!”

“There are reasons for it. I’ll explain after today.”

“Wait….”

“…”

“Is there a baby?”

“…”

“Really? No way!”

Now Seunggyu’s eyes widened as he stared at Jiheon in disbelief.

Technically, there was a child, but how was he supposed to explain it?

“It’s not exactly what you’re thinking.”

“Then what is it?”

“Anyway, I’ll tell you after today.”

“Hey! Do you want to get hurt? You can’t just leave me hanging after saying that! I can’t wait until tomorrow!”

Seunggyu demanded, his face red with excitement, but Jiheon ignored him and left the office first.

After work.

Jeong-oh adjusted her outfit and fixed her makeup in the restroom before stepping out. In her team area, she ran into Eunju, who observed her quietly, as though taking in every detail, and then returned to her seat.

Similarly, Miran, who had been staring at her blankly, finally spoke up as Jeong-oh approached.

“Team Leader, I’ll be leaving early today.”

“Oh, oh, yes, sure, sure.”

Even though she’d been watching intently, Miran was startled when Jeong-oh addressed her. Since the incident in the restroom two days ago, Miran had been spacing out, staring at Jeong-oh, and then being startled whenever she spoke.

“Deputy Manager, I can give you a ride. I’m leaving now too.”

Kihoon wasn’t any less attentive. He seemed to feel sorry for her.

Yesterday morning, he handed her a calming pill, and today he offered her chocolate. When Jeong-oh had to deal with unpleasant tasks, he stepped in to help and encouraged her to stay strong.

It was nice of him, but I hope he doesn't pity me too much.

If he knew everything, he'd probably feel betrayed instead.

Feeling a bit guilty, Jeong-oh politely declined Kihoon's offer.

"No, it's alright. I have somewhere I need to go."

"Where? I can drop you off there too."

"No, really, it's fine. I'll go alone."

From her seat, Go Eunju let out a quiet, knowing chuckle. She seemed to understand everything.

Since the restroom incident two days ago, Eunju was the only one who hadn't changed her attitude. She handed Jeong-oh the recording of Chae Eunbi's vile words with her usual demeanor.

By now, Jeong-oh appreciated Eunju's mix of cynicism and loyalty.

If only she didn't have that mysterious smile, like she knew something no one else did.

"Anyway, thanks. I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be leaving now."

With a quick goodbye, Jeong-oh rushed outside.

Across the street from the company, Jiheon was waiting.

Spotting his car, she quickly ran over and hopped in.

"No one saw, right?"

"No one."

Jiheon answered calmly, watching her exaggerated nodding.

A sweet, tangy scent filled the car. When she turned her head toward the source of the scent, she found the back seat filled with items.

There was a large bouquet of flowers and an even larger basket of fruits. The fruit basket was so big that it could practically fit Yena inside. Jeong-oh's mouth dropped open.

"Why did you get something that big?"

"You said Yena and your mother like them."

Feeling a bit guilty, Jeong-oh nodded, and Jiheon asked her.

"Did something happen with Chae Eunbi two days ago?"

"Oh…."

She felt another pang. She didn't want to tell him, but realizing that hiding it might hurt him even more, Jeong-oh decided to tell him the truth.

"It seems she and her friends went to my mom's restaurant."

"…"

As the car began moving, her story continued. Jiheon's expression remained largely unchanged, but he occasionally turned his head away, sighing deeply.

"Manager Chae didn't come to work today either. Maybe she's planning to quit."

"She probably doesn't have the face to show. Her true nature has been exposed."

"Anyway, stay out of it."

"You want me to stay out of it again?"

“Yes, for now. Let’s just focus on Yena and my mother today.”

Not wanting him to get riled up over Eunbi’s issue, Jeong-oh quickly changed the subject.

“Just in case, don’t get too hurt if my mom says harsh things.”

“…”

“My mom’s been through a lot because of me. But she’s not really that scary.”

This time, Jiheon held his breath. The tension, momentarily forgotten during their conversation about Chae Eunbi, resurfaced. Despite Jeong-oh’s reassurance and reminder to stay calm, his shoulders grew tense.

***

Kuksun was busy the entire time. She had even closed the restaurant early today to come home and prepare a meal, but she’d gotten a little too ambitious and was running short on time.

“Oh dear, what to do? I forgot to pick up the rice cakes. They’ll be here any moment now—how will I manage?”

“Grandma, who’s coming over?”

“Should I ask them to pick them up on their way? Or maybe we’ll just make do with what we have.”

“Grandma, who’s coming over?”

“You’ll see.”

Although she was half-distracted with all the fussing about, Kuksun flashed a warm smile at Yena. Still, Yena felt a bit put out that her grandmother hadn’t given her a straight answer.

She also needed to talk about the fifty thousand won, but she knew her grandma probably wouldn't pay much attention.

Pouting, Yena wandered into the living room and began to think.

Who could this guest be?

She had a feeling it might be that man, but then again, maybe it wouldn't be.

If she waited a little longer, she'd find out who the guest was.

She waited quietly for the guest, and before long, she heard the sound of the keypad at the front door. Mom had arrived before the guest. Yena stood up from her seat.

"Princess Yena!"

"Mom…"

But as she was about to run to her mother, she froze in place.

There was someone else behind her mom. Her mom had come home with a guest. And sure enough, it was that man.

Her guess was exactly right, yet oddly, seeing the two of them come into the house together made Yena feel uneasy, even more than she had imagined.

I'm Mom's partner. I'm her partner.

She felt an unsettling premonition, as if her role as her mom's partner might be taken away.

Jiheon was the first to greet Yena as she stood there quietly.

"Hi, Yena."

Every time Jiheon saw Yena, his heart fluttered.

He’d briefly stopped by that morning to see her off to the daycare bus, and now, only a few hours later, she somehow seemed even more adorable.

Suppressing his nervous excitement, Jiheon politely greeted Kuksun, who had come out of the kitchen.

“Good evening, ma’am. I’m Jung Jiheon.”

And just as Kuksun was about to greet him in return…

“Mister, is Grandma your mom?”

Yena, who had been observing closely, looked up at him with wide eyes and asked, her voice assertive.

“Why do you call my grandma ‘Mom’?”

Ch73 - Something's Up

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Yena narrowed her eyes and stared intently at Jiheon.

Jiheon was at a loss for words. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead in this unexpected crisis.

Jeong-oh smiled kindly and tilted her head to look at Yena.

“Yena, what does Mom call Dobin’s mom?”

“Jinseo-ssi.”

“And what else?”

“Dobin’s mother.”

“Right. You can call other people’s mothers ‘mother’ too. The teacher at the Go academy calls me ‘mother,’ doesn’t she?”

With her seasoned wisdom, Jeong-oh provided a wise answer. Still, Yena’s lips protruded in a pout.

At just the right moment, Kuksun jumped in to greet Jiheon.

“Come in. You must have had a hard time getting here.”

Jiheon handed the fruit basket and bouquet he brought to Kuksun.

“I brought these fruits because I heard they were Yena and your favorites.”

“Do you believe that?”

Kuksun smiled as she checked the fruits in the basket: apple mangoes, Shine Muscats, Hallabongs…

“She just told me to buy what she likes. Even today, she had to indulge her greed.”

On this special day, Jeong-oh mentioned fruits she usually didn’t buy due to their cost. Jiheon listened carefully.

Jiheon blinked and looked at Jeong-oh. He couldn’t say anything seeing her nonchalantly turning away and pretending to be uninterested. It was his fault for not knowing her preferences.

While Jiheon stood hesitantly, Kuksun quietly observed his face.

Yena’s dad…

At first, she hadn’t noticed at all, but upon closer inspection, he resembled Yena, especially when his expression was blank.

“I was busy, so I didn’t bring the rice cakes I had prepared.”

As Kuksun continued to look at Jiheon, she spoke.

“Jeong-oh, you should go get some.”

“Sure, I will.”

As Jeong-oh walked back toward the entrance, Jiheon said, “The rice cakes must be heavy, so if you tell me where they are, I can go get them.”

“No, I can’t ask a guest to do that. Our Jeong-oh eats well, so she’ll have the strength for it.”

Jeong-oh shot a subtle glance at her mother, who had openly revealed this public secret, as she calmly put on her shoes.

“Mom, I want to go too!”

Yena chased after Jeong-oh.

“Just stay here.”

“No! I’m going!”

Yena clung to Jeong-oh’s arm. With a more stubborn voice than usual, Jeong-oh made a perplexed expression.

Kuksun waved her hands toward the two of them.

“Alright, hurry and go together.”

Jeong-oh looked at Kuksun and Jiheon before taking Yena’s hand and leaving.

Now, the only people left in the house were Kuksun and Jiheon. Just the two of them.

“Shall we sit over there for a moment?”

Kuksun gestured toward the dining table.

In the small living room, two tables were joined together, and several dishes were already laid out. Kuksun led Jiheon toward the kitchen. Jiheon, who had been tense, replied with a short “yes” and followed her.

As Jiheon sat down across from her, Kuksun opened her mouth first.

“You haven’t remembered anything for seven years, right?”

“Yes. I lost my memory, causing Jeong-oh to struggle alone. I feel sorry.”

He was still the same respectful and polite person as when they first met. Nevertheless, the memories from seven years ago resurfaced, causing his heart to flutter.

The person who had brought the greatest despair to my pretty daughter, my smart and kind daughter who had never caused me trouble in her life.

It was hard to say, “It’s okay, it’s all in the past,” so easily.

But she couldn’t be angry either.

After a brief silence, Kuksun smiled and honestly shared her feelings in a soft voice.

“… I went to break the switch, but I couldn’t.”

“……”

“If my child is precious, then other people’s children must be precious too. Thinking of that, I feel sorry for our director’s life too.”

“……”

“You must have had a tough time getting here.”

She decided to accept it.

Seeing Jiheon, who was stiff and tense, she couldn’t bring herself to say harsh words. She couldn’t push away a man her daughter had accepted.

It wasn’t his fault that he lost his memory, so she couldn’t blame him endlessly. She couldn’t resent him for having a mother who intervened between the two of them either. It wasn’t his fault.

What Kuksun could do was limited from the start. With a daughter she treasured more than her own life, she could only play the submissive role in her daughter’s relationships.

She thought to herself not to reprimand him and found that his tense expression was deeply touching.

“I heard you’re a single father, right?”

“……Yes.”

“Our child was born that way. Even if I have nothing to pass on, I shouldn’t pass on such a thing. But now my daughter is like that, so I feel really ashamed of myself. As a mother, it was really hard to watch her suffer… but Jeong-oh has grown up so well.”

Kuksun proudly spoke about her daughter after a long time. Just thinking about her daughter brought a smile to her face, even in such a serious moment.

“When I went to break the switch, Jeong-oh said, ‘Are you going to hit someone else’s child?’”

“……”

“If you realize that someone else’s child is as precious as your own, she must have grown well despite the difficult environment.”

As Kuksun couldn’t hide her smile, Jiheon quietly raised his head to look at her.

“A long time ago, I couldn’t love myself, you know. I couldn’t love myself as a single mother. But our Jeong-oh looks like me. Unlike me, she’s the most beautiful and lovely person in the world, but she looks like me.”

“……”

“… So I could love myself too.”

The story of mother Lee Kuksun and person Lee Kuksun.

Jiheon thought that Kuksun and Jeong-oh resembled each other a lot. Seeing the poised mother who spoke gently, warmth emanating from her presence, Jiheon felt for the first time that he envied Jeong-oh.

At that moment, as Jiheon’s eyes began to well up with tears.

“Don’t hate yourself too much. Don’t blame yourself. What was unavoidable was truly unavoidable. Think about the future now. Our Yena’s father will come to love himself more when he sees a child who resembles him. That’s the power of a child who looks like me.”

“……”

“After dinner today, tell Yena about it too.”

Eventually, he realized that it was his story, Jung Jiheon’s story.

And, ‘our Yena’s father.’

The unfamiliar title made his throat burn.

Jiheon lowered his head to hide his reddened eyes.

“I’m not sure if I should say this…”

He had prepared himself to be scolded harshly.

“I don’t know if I deserve this kind of encouragement…”

The unexpected encouragement made him feel even guiltier. His heart ached. He thought that it would hurt less if he had just been scolded, a foolish thought indeed.

“Oh, there’s no need to be so emotional already. Yena’s father has a tough road ahead.”

However, our Lee Kuksun was a person who couldn’t adapt to such a tender and heartfelt atmosphere. As she waved her hands and raised her voice, Jiheon’s tears, which had almost fallen, retreated.

“Our Yena isn’t just any ordinary child.”

The emphasis she placed on the phrase “just any ordinary child” was particularly strong.

“Everything has its trial and error. Even if Yena complains too much, just think that she takes after me and love her.”

Kuksun firmly added her advice for Jiheon’s future.

Even if she warmly welcomed him, Kuksun knew that Jiheon wouldn’t be walking on flowers the entire way.

Navigating this obstacle would be his stepping stone as a father.

Mom’s Steps Were Faster Than Usual

Mom’s steps were faster than usual. She hurried as if she had forgotten something at home, like someone who needed to get back quickly.

Well, she did forget something. Not an object, but…

Mom hurried so much that Yena was out of breath. In the end, she couldn’t say a word on the way to the rice cake shop.

On the way back from getting the rice cakes, Mom’s pace slowed down.

Seizing the opportunity, Yena spoke up.

“Mom, today a lady tried to give me fifty thousand won.”

Jung-oh’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Who? Was it the lady from the restaurant?”

“No, just a stranger.”

“When? Where?”

“At the academy elevator on the way to the academy.”

“Why? Why did she want to give you money?”

“The lady’s bracelet got stuck in my hair and messed it up. So she wanted to give me money to say sorry.”

“And what did you do?”

“I didn’t take the money. The teacher told the lady it was fine. She said I could just tie my hair back again.”

“Oh, that’s a relief. Yena, you shouldn’t accept money like that in the future. Understood?”

“Yeah.”

Even after answering, Yena felt a lingering uneasiness. Unable to express how she felt, she walked sullenly, her grip on Jung-oh’s hand tightening.

When they finally reached home, Jung-oh sighed as she looked at the stairs.

“It’s heavy. Why did Mom make us carry all this rice cake…”

“Mom, should I carry it?”

“No, our princess should go up first.”

Jung-oh firmly refused Yena’s kind offer and patted her head.

Still, Yena wanted to help. She felt down again. As she trudged up the stairs, she suddenly heard a voice from below.

“Hello, Yena’s mother.”

“Oh, Officer Kyung-sa! Hello. Are you off work now?”

“Yes. But you look like you have a lot to carry. Can I help?”

“Oh, no, it’s fine.”

“If you go up alone, it’ll take you an hour to get to the top of the stairs.”

Yena ran back down the stairs. Officer Kyung-bae was standing next to Jung-oh.

“Hello, sir.”

“Hi. Yena, have you been doing well?”

As Kyung-bae greeted them, he took the heavy load from Jung-oh.

“No, no, wait…”

“I’ll carry it for you. You go up first with the cart.”

While Jung-oh felt embarrassed, Kyung-bae quickly started climbing the stairs. Yena led the way. Jung-oh hurriedly pulled the cart to follow Kyung-bae.

Indeed, with the help of the police officer, the journey to the fourth floor was swift. Kyung-bae placed the box at the door and turned around.

“Ah… thank you so much, Officer.”

“Not at all. I’m glad to have been of help. Well, I’ll be going now. Goodbye, Yena.”

“Yes. Goodbye!”

Jung-oh watched Kyung-bae go down the stairs for a while before opening the front door.

“Grandma, we’re back!”

Yena greeted cheerfully.

Meanwhile, the living room table was overflowing with food. Jiheon was busily following Guk-soon around.

He looked like a confused new employee, unable to do anything, just standing there trying to pick up on the atmosphere.

As Guk-soon placed the last dish on the table, she asked Jung-oh.

“Did you carry all the rice cake up the stairs by yourself? You should have called me.”

“No, I met Officer Kyung-bae outside, and he carried it for me.”

“Oh, thank you. I’ll have to bring him some rice cakes later.”

Officer Kyung-bae? Jiheon wondered who she was talking about but couldn’t find an opening to join in on Jung-oh and Guk-soon’s conversation.

Guk-soon finished setting up the last dish and said, “Let’s sit down. Our director should sit too.”

The spread was too abundant for just the four of them.

Yena felt a bit miffed. Why was there more food today than on her birthday?

No one paid attention to Yena’s feelings, and the conversation between Jung-oh and Guk-soon continued.

“Mom, why did you make so much food?”

“It’s better than having too little, right? Director, can you finish it all?”

Guk-soon asked, and Jiheon replied cheerfully.

“Yes, of course.”

Hmph. I’ll see if you can finish it all.

Yena glared at Jiheon with sulky eyes and then turned her head away.

Jiheon finished two bowls of rice for the first time in his life. Just as Jiheon cleared his plate, Guk-soon returned with rice cakes and fruits. Jiheon managed to eat all of that too, though he was still tense inside.

After the meal, he resolved to tell Yena everything.

He felt nervous and trembled at the thought of how Yena would react.

Unaware of any of this, Yena quietly hid her disappointment.

She had wanted to tease him if he couldn't finish, but he ate everything perfectly, leaving her unable to mock him. She felt annoyed watching Guk-soon rejoice over Jiheon's gluttony.

I'm the only one who gets praised for eating well.

A little while later, Guk-soon quietly called Jung-oh to the end of the kitchen. Yena held her breath, trying to listen to their conversation, but she couldn't catch what they were saying. Eventually, Jung-oh returned to the living room after talking with Guk-soon and approached Jiheon.

"Brother."

That was all she said, but it felt like she was signaling something.

Something's up!

Yena's heart raced.

Moreover, brother? Not just the director, but brother?

Yena's eyes darted back and forth, sensing something suspicious. In the meantime, Jiheon approached her. Jung-oh also sat closely beside him.

"Yena."

Yena couldn't respond to Jiheon's soft voice.

"Sir is actually…"

Thump.

Time seemed to stop, and Jiheon's heart raced.

What was Jiheon about to say?

Yena gulped unconsciously. Even before hearing the whole story, tears began to well up in her eyes.

Thump thump thump thump…

“Your father. Yena’s father.”

Thud.

It felt as if time and her heart had both come to a halt.

Ch74 - Mother is My World

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Seeing tears welling up in Yeona’s eyes, Jiheon spoke again.

“Uncle is actually your dad.”

“…….”

“Your dad. Your real dad.”

As he repeated the words, his heart felt constricted painfully.

Yeona. It’s dad.

Dad, dad.

A hundred times, a thousand times, it’s what he wanted to say. And what he wanted to hear.

In fact, it was something that should have been said a long time ago.

A name that should have been called out.

Time seemed to freeze, and no one moved.

Jeong-o and Guk-soon held their breath, watching the scene.

After a moment, tears swelled even more in Yeona’s eyes. It seemed she was trying not to let them fall, her face tensed up, turning bright red.

“……It’s a lie.”

Yeona shook her head in disbelief.

Jeong-o stepped in, gently putting a hand on Yeona’s shoulder and speaking softly.

“Yeona, it’s true. He’s really your dad. Your real dad.”

“It’s a lie.”

Yeona’s voice rose stubbornly.

“Then why did you pretend not to know all this time?”

With Yeona’s sharp observation, Jeong-o replied.

“Dad forgot. Sometimes, our Yeona forgets too, right?”

“It’s a lie.”

“…….”

“How could he forget? I remember my mom, my grandma, and even grandma’s friends.”

Yeona insisted, refusing to accept it.

How could he call himself a dad and never show up? Why did he pretend not to know me?

There were times she had dreamed of her dad.

In her dreams, he lived in the heavens. He said he couldn’t come to see Yeona because he was up there. He would visit her in dreams sometimes and told her to play joyfully during the day and meet at night.

Before long, her dreams had convinced seven-year-old Yeona. She thought her dad was in the heavens. It felt natural.

The idea that he was living well somewhere and didn't want to see his daughter was incomprehensible. She didn't know the word "qualification," but she understood what it meant. Such a dad had no right to be her father.

"Why are you saying such things?"

She couldn't accept the words themselves.

"Why are you saying such things?"

It seemed like the three adults—her mom, grandma, and the uncle—were trying to deceive her. It felt like they were mocking her because she was a little kid.

She had a good memory too. She even remembered the Go games she played with the uncle, who seemed a bit annoyed with her back then.

Yeona could recall the indifferent expression Jiheon wore the first time they met.

Children remember.

Though she couldn't express it with the word "sorrow," she had stacked scenes from that day deep in her heart in chronological order.

"Uncle, get out!"

The tears she had been trying hard to hold back fell.

"Get out! Don't come to my house!"

Waaah!

As her cries burst forth, Jeong-o embraced Yeona and comforted her.

"Yeona, oh, why are you crying, our Yeona?"

As Jeong-o patted her, Yeona's cries grew louder, leaning into her mother's embrace.

Jiheon was also taken aback and frozen in place. When he didn’t move, Yeona shouted towards Guk-soon.

“Grandma, tell the uncle to get out! Waaah!”

How could he be a dad when he hadn’t even shown up for her birthday?

Where was such a dad? A dad who hadn’t appeared until his daughter was almost seven?

“Hurry! Tell him to get out!”

Something felt off since morning.

No, it had been strange since yesterday. No, it was strange since the day the uncle handed her the koala stuffed animal.

From the day they met together with her mom, the uncle’s attitude changed.

She knew. The uncle didn’t come to see her. He came to take her mom away.

But that shouldn’t be allowed. The uncle was an adult, and she was a child. Children needed their mothers.

In her world, there was only her mom.

In her mother’s world, she was everything.

Waaah!

The cries intensified as she could not accept the reality that had crashed down upon her.

After sending Jiheon away, Jeong-o comforted Yeona. Her sobs didn’t easily stop.

After spending the whole day with her on her lap, watching TV and reading a few fairy tales, Yeona finally lay down to sleep.

Even then, Jeong-o carefully asked a question, feeling sorry for not having brought up Jiheon’s story even once.

“Yeona.”

“Yes?”

“Do you not need a dad?”

Surprisingly, the answer came quickly.

“Yes. I don’t need a dad.”

Maybe because she had cried so much, no more tears came out. So Yeona could convey her clear feelings more clearly than ever.

“I want to live like this with my mom and grandma, just the three of us. Forever.”

Having answered coldly and waiting, she grew anxious when her mother didn’t react.

Had she spoken too harshly, making her mom hate her?

In the dim room, it felt like her mother’s eyes shone, and she worried that her mom might be crying.

“I love you, mom.”

Yeona said, pulling Jeong-o into a tight hug.

Mother is my world.

“I love you too.”

Fortunately, she heard her mother’s warm voice from the embrace. Only then did Yeona feel relieved.

“I love you more.”

“How much?”

“As much as the whole world. As much as the whole world.”

Yeona hugged Jeong-o even tighter, confessing her heart.

“So please don’t leave me, mom.”

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Young-mi requested a paternity test for Jiheon and Yeona at the genetic research center. The director of the lab said he would call with the results later tonight, and Young-mi waited anxiously for the call.

For some reason, I felt like the child might be Ji-heon’s flesh and blood.

The pretty child I met in the elevator. Her expression, blinking her large eyes as she looked at me, stuck in my mind and wouldn’t fade away.

‘What if that child is our Ji-heon’s…?’

Then what should I do? What should I say to Ji-heon?

I was so worried that my mind became chaotic.

A little after 9 PM, a phone call came in. Young-mi immediately answered the call.

“Yes, Director.”

[Madam, I’ve completed the tests on the materials you sent.] My heart raced.

“…What are the results?”

[There are no matches in the genetic types of the two samples.] “Then… does that mean the child isn’t his?”

[Yes. There’s absolutely no possibility.] My legs went weak, and Young-mi collapsed to the ground. The anxiety and restlessness washed away quickly, replaced by a surge of anger.

So my son is being played by that cunning girl?

“Director, please send me the test results by fax.”

Young-mi requested with a trembling voice filled with rage.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Ji-heon couldn’t leave right away and waited in front of Jeong-oh’s house for a long time.

Around 9 PM, Jeong-oh finally came outside. Seeing her, Ji-heon immediately got out of the car and ran towards her.

“Where’s Ye-na?”

“Yeah.”

Jeong-oh sighed as she answered.

Nothing in this world is easy. I never expected my daughter to reject her dad like this.

Ji-heon finally understood what Guk-soon meant by her request. Ye-na was definitely not an easy opponent. Knowing that her stubbornness and obstinacy were in her genes, he couldn’t complain.

“I think mom knew. She figured out that Ye-na wouldn’t accept me right away.”

“Ha. I see.”

At that confession, Jeong-oh suddenly burst into laughter.

“Then, oppa, I’m okay.”

“You’re okay?”

Then… what about me?

From Ji-heon’s perspective, Jeong-oh’s opinion was shocking.

Jeong-oh continued to speak clearly.

“It’s not like I accepted you just because you’re really handsome or anything. I accepted you because Ye-na needs a dad. But if she’s acting like this, then I can’t complain.”

She had accepted Ji-heon without a second thought, wanting to provide her daughter with a dad, but after experiencing Ye-na’s outburst, she felt it was okay to take things slowly.

Though Ji-heon looked hurt, she thought, well, he’s an adult.

“Let’s understand Ye-na. She’ll need time to accept you. She’s been my partner for a long time.”

“……”

“No matter how much she’s supposed to call you Dad, she wouldn’t like the feeling of losing her partner.”

Ji-heon quietly nodded at Jeong-oh’s persuasion.

He could understand Ye-na’s feelings. Ji-heon also didn’t particularly like it when Jeong-oh was close to other male colleagues at work. He knew it was part of her job, but still couldn’t shake the desire to have her only by his side.

Ye-na must have a strong possessiveness like her father.

It’s not like someone else is trying to take her away, and if his daughter says she likes her mom, he should understand.

As he changed his mindset, he felt as if he was becoming a better person.

Becoming a parent is indeed a challenging task.

Realizing that not everything goes as planned and learning to have patience.

The rookie dad, who was seven years late, learns life this way.

Having accepted everything, Ji-heon took a step closer to Jeong-oh, gently pulled her in, and apologized.

“I’m sorry.”

“Hmm? For what?”

“Just. For everything.”

After leaving Jeong-oh’s house and waiting for her, Ji-heon reflected on his past. Guk-soon’s stories and Ye-na’s tears had given him many insights.

He felt a deep sense of remorse towards Jeong-oh, but he had never properly apologized to her. Surely, she hadn’t accepted him just because she liked him. She must have made many sacrifices for the child.

“Raising a child alone is tough, right?”

Ji-heon loosened the hug and said warmly.

Jeong-oh shook her head. It was something she hadn’t even considered.

“No, I wasn’t alone because I had my mom.”

“Still, it must have been painful and hard.”

“No. Just look at Ye-na. How beautiful she is. When I see Ye-na, all my fatigue disappears. So, it wasn’t hard at all…”

Her voice came out flat, but strangely, tears fell unexpectedly. Jeong-oh was startled and quickly wiped her tears with her hand.

“No, I’m not crying because I’m upset…”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I really wasn’t that hard off?”

Her gratitude for his apology made her want to smile instead of cry, but the tears flowed uncontrollably. Just then, heavy raindrops began to fall to the ground. It was a sudden downpour.

Ji-heon quickly took off his coat and draped it over her head, leading her to his car. Though Jeong-oh didn’t understand why he was dragging her into the car instead of staying close to the building, she stumbled after him.

Ji-heon pushed her into the car first and then hurried in himself, shaking the moisture off his head as he said.

“Wait until the rain stops to go inside.”

“……”

“Oh, right, this is your house.”

He had panicked at the unexpected rain and had pulled her into the car without thinking.

Jeong-oh burst into laughter, “Haha! What were you planning?”

Ji-heon complained that she shouldn’t laugh, but her laughter didn’t easily subside. The sound of laughter was more refreshing than the rain that night.

Happiness perhaps begins from small deficiencies.

If one had everything from the start, they might never know what gratitude is. Deficiencies teach us that it’s okay not to be perfect.

In the memories of filling those deficiencies by our own strength,

In the memories of struggling to be happy amid those deficiencies,

We truly were happy and created unforgettable memories.

So, I have no resentment towards you.

Looking back, all of it was a good memory. We kept being happy.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

The next morning, at 6:30 AM.

Ding dong, ding dong, ding dong.

Someone was urgently ringing the doorbell from early in the morning. Ji-heon, who had fallen asleep only after thinking about Ye-na and Jeong-oh until dawn, got up with difficulty and walked heavily to open the front door.

It was Mrs. Jang Young-mi.

“Mother, this early in the morning…”

Ji-heon sighed resentfully, but Young-mi entered without a hint of remorse, opening the door wide.

“I came by last night too. When did you change the front door password?”

“A while ago.”

Although Ji-heon was displeased with Young-mi’s attitude, he thought he should question her about Jeong-oh while she was here.

The call seven years ago where someone impersonated him. And everything that had been erased about Lee Jeong-oh. He was sure that his mother was behind it all.

But before Ji-heon could say anything, Young-mi spoke up first.

“Are you seeing Lee Jeong-oh’s child?”

“……”

“Did you meet that child too?”

On the table lay a tablet. A large image of what was clearly a children’s bicycle was displayed on the screen.

Young-mi could sense that Ji-heon was planning to give this to the child named Lee Ye-na.

“Did Lee Jeong-oh tell you that Ye-na is your daughter?”

“Did you come here to check on that? This early in the morning?”

“Jeong Ji-heon!”

From a mother’s perspective, it was infuriating.

“I found out. That child is not your daughter.”

My foolish son. My pathetic son.

After being deceived seven years ago, he was falling for the same trick again.

“She’s not your biological daughter.”

Thinking of her son, tears welled up in her eyes despite her rising anger.

“That girl, Lee Jeong-oh, is trying to trick you by bringing a child whose bloodline she doesn’t even know!”

Ch75 - The Spicy Taste of Life

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“You’re completely being deceived by Lee Jeong-oh!”

Ji-heon coldly stared at Young-mi, who was shouting in anger.

“How did you know that Jeong-oh and I were meeting?”

A chill ran through his questioning voice.

Young-mi closed her mouth and furrowed her eyebrows.

Ji-heon continued his interrogation.

“Are you investigating me?”

“I heard it from Eun-bi. Yes, from Eun-bi.”

“Eun-bi? What did she say?”

“……”

“Are you saying that Chae Eun-bi did some background check on me?”

“What’s important isn’t that!”

“No, that’s important to me.”

“……What?”

“Who told you that Ye-na is my biological daughter?”

“I found out myself. I figured it out on my own!”

Young-mi wanted to skip over the topic of Chae Eun-bi and point out the ugly behavior of Lee Jeong-oh, but her son was fixated on the core issue. It was frustrating and infuriating.

She pulled out a document labeled “Genetic Test Results” from her bag and showed it to Ji-heon.

“Here! Do you not believe it even after seeing this?”

At the bottom of the front page of the several sheets of results, the phrase “Biological Probability (%): N” was prominently displayed in bold.

Ji-heon received the results, calmly scanned them, and then coldly scoffed.

So, you approached Ye-na, and you didn’t say a word to me.

He could no longer trust his mother at all.

“How did you obtain the samples? How did you approach Ye-na?”

As Ji-heon pressed her, Young-mi’s pupils shook violently. At this point, her son should have been in shock and crumbling, reflecting on and regretting the past, but he showed no signs of wavering, which startled her.

Now, Ji-heon looked at Young-mi with sharper eyes, focused more on the truth than their mother-son relationship. If she had any involvement in harming Ye-na, no matter how much she was his mother, he would have no choice but to report her.

“Were you trying to kidnap Ye-na?”

“W-what…!”

“Did you have a part in Ye-na’s kidnapping case?”

“Kidnap? What kind of nonsense is that!”

Young-mi, feeling wronged in her own way, shouted back.

“How did you find out about Ye-na and Jeong-oh? When did you start knowing?”

Ji-heon persistently pressed her. Unlike the panicking Young-mi, Ji-heon maintained a calm and rational demeanor throughout, which was terrifying.

Under the relentless attack of her son’s questions, Young-mi finally confessed honestly.

“It hasn’t been long! Just two days! I found out because Eun-bi came and was complaining about Lee Jeong-oh!”

“As soon as Chae Eun-bi mentioned the name Lee Jeong-oh, you decided to have a paternity test for Ye-na.”

Ji-heon scoffed coldly.

The outline was slowly coming together.

“You knew that I met Jeong-oh seven years ago.”

In the end, Young-mi had spilled everything.

Since Ji-heon had only confirmed what he had suspected, there was nothing particularly surprising for him. The disappointment he felt towards his mother could never be undone.

Ji-heon looked at the results again.

“The paternity test was done yesterday, and you received the results yesterday as well. Did you personally deliver the samples to the lab?”

“…….”

“You must have had Driver Choi do it for you, right? Can you trust him?”

Young-mi felt a chill at Ji-heon’s sharpness, as if he had placed her in the palm of his hand.

Driver Choi had parked his car in Ji-heon’s underground parking lot and was waiting for Young-mi.

Last night, Young-mi had suddenly called to say she would visit her son’s house at 6 a.m. Though he was displeased, sensing something was off, he agreed without complaint.

Barely shaking off the drowsiness, he woke up, picked up Young-mi, and drove to Ji-heon’s house, hoping she would come out much later.

He wanted to rest a bit longer. But she came out earlier than expected. Moreover, her son, Jeong Ji-heon, was with her.

“Good morning, driver.”

“Good morning, ma’am.”

“Driver, I’m sorry, but I need to check the black box memory card.”

After a light greeting, Ji-heon entered the car and swiftly removed the memory card from the black box. It was a quick movement without any unnecessary actions. Driver Choi stood there, bewildered.

Ji-heon connected the memory card to the tablet PC he had brought. Then he started playing the video stored on the memory card.

The video recorded the moment yesterday at around 4 p.m. when Driver Choi received an envelope of documents from Young-mi and was heading to the lab. It was also when he met Lawyer Chae Eun-yeob.

After watching the video, Ji-heon sighed coldly, and Young-mi looked bewildered.

“Oh, no, why is Eun-yeob… why…?”

Before Driver Choi could explain what had happened, Ji-heon asked first.

“Driver, did you meet Lawyer Chae Eun-yeob yesterday?”

“Ah, yes… The lawyer said he would give me an electric car someday, and I received it yesterday.”

“How many times did that person call you yesterday?”

“About four or five times, I think…”

Ji-heon’s eyes narrowed. Young-mi’s mouth fell open. It was the first time she had seen the dignified Young-mi with such a shocked expression.

Realizing that something was wrong, Driver Choi quickly apologized.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you should stop contacting Lawyer Chae Eun-yeob altogether. Block him completely.”

Driver Choi immediately complied with Ji-heon’s instructions. After confirming that Driver Choi had blocked Eun-yeob’s number, Ji-heon turned to Young-mi.

“How much have you talked about me with Chae Eun-yeob?”

But Young-mi could only shake her head in denial.

“No way. That can’t be true. Look, is this the right time to be swapping something?”

Even after rewinding the video several times, she couldn’t bring herself to believe the truth. The black box didn’t have a device that showed the interior. While it looked like Eun-yeob opened the car door and got inside, it wasn’t clear exactly what he had done.

Young-mi raised her voice again.

“I believe the test results! You’re being deceived! You need to wake up!”

“There’s no need to get worked up, Mother. We can just do the test again.”

People tend to deny reality after experiencing something shocking. Ji-heon knew very well that his mother was currently in that process.

“I’m 100% sure I’m right, but even if I’m not, my feelings won’t change.”

Though he was contemptuous towards his mother, Ji-heon spoke politely until the end.

“Stop it now.”

“…….”

“Because of you, that child has lived without a father for six years. How do you plan to face her later?”

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

Early morning.

Hearing sounds from the kitchen, Guk-soon jumped out of bed and went outside.

Seeing Jeong-oh standing in the kitchen, Guk-soon smiled brightly.

After living for a while, she had seen her daughter do the housework.

“What are you doing here? Are you planning to ruin your mother’s housework?”

“No, it’s just that Mom made a lot of food yesterday, so I can just heat it up.”

“Forget it. Just get ready to go to work.”

Guk-soon snatched the frying pan from Jeong-oh’s hands. Jeong-oh, in turn, rubbed her mother’s arm and flirted.

“Mom, you must have had a tough day yesterday.”

“…….”

“Ji-heon said he’s sorry for making you work so hard.”

“What now? Forget it.”

“…….”

“Ye-na’s dad probably worked harder. Besides, I even got told to leave by my daughter.”

“Right… it’s tough, it really is.”

Jeong-oh sighed deeply.

Guk-soon couldn’t help but laugh at the memory of Ji-heon’s flustered expression.

Why is it that both her daughter and her daughter’s boyfriend are so cute and acting up?

“Sigh… it makes me feel bad thinking about it, Jeong Ji-heon.”

“That’s just a part of the process. Did you think you could become a dad without going through some trials?”

“…….”

“You need to tread some rough ground and experience some spicy flavors to truly become a dad.”

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“Sigh….”

“There’s nothing to be disheartened about. Soon enough, the two of you will be off having fun without you.”

“Surely not.”

“Just you wait and see.”

With Guk-soon’s confident proclamation, Jeong-oh merely shrugged her shoulders.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

On the way to Ye-na’s kindergarten.

As usual, Ji-heon was waiting in front of the house.

“Did you sleep well, Ye-na?”

Hmph.

Ye-na naturally wrinkled her nose and tightly held Jeong-oh’s hand, walking ahead.

Should she be glad that she didn’t cry and scream like last night? Jeong-oh could completely understand both Ye-na’s feelings and Ji-heon’s, and it made her feel as if fate was being cruel.

Ji-heon followed the two, but he couldn’t find the right words to say. The biggest master of this future family was the 7-year-old little girl, Lee Ye-na.

Worried that Ye-na might burst into tears at any moment or that she might not even be able to get on the kindergarten bus that morning, Ji-heon nervously watched.

After Ye-na left, just like yesterday, Ji-heon waved until the kindergarten bus was out of sight and then informed Jeong-oh about the events of that morning.

“I think Ye-na met my mother yesterday.”

“Your mother?”

“On the way to Ye-na’s academy. I think my mother took some of Ye-na’s hair.”

“Oh!”

Jeong-oh clapped her hands.

“Right, right! Ye-na mentioned that some lady’s bracelet got caught in her hair and messed it up.”

Ji-heon didn’t mention that the lady had given Ye-na fifty thousand won, worried that it might upset her.

It’s so unfortunate. To ruin the first meeting with his granddaughter like that.

After being lost in thought for a moment, Jeong-oh asked.

“So, did you have a paternity test done with Ye-na’s hair?”

“I did, but it came back with no possibility of her being my biological child.”

Worried that Jeong-oh might be upset, Ji-heon spoke softly. However, contrary to his expectations, Jeong-oh burst into laughter.

“Pfft. What kind of test did they conduct? Did they use Do-bin’s hair instead of Ye-na’s?”

Just because you cover the sky with your palm doesn’t mean it will be hidden. You can always do the test again.

“What do you think?”

“What about?”

“Ye-na might not be your biological child, you know. Don’t you doubt it?”

“Chae Eun-yeob must have manipulated everything. The driver met my mother and handed her the materials before heading to the lab, and he met Chae Eun-yeob along the way.”

“No.”

“…….”

“Just be honest. It’s possible that Ye-na isn’t really your biological daughter. Don’t you have any doubts?”

Ji-heon had never doubted from the beginning, but Jeong-oh blinked her eyes and asked again, her expression clearly testing her own feelings. He was no fool to fall for that, but he had never entertained any doubts.

He would never leave her alone again. He wouldn’t let her feel anxious.

If someone were to stir up trouble, he wouldn’t stand for it.

“I don’t doubt it.”

“…….”

“Stay by my side.”

“…….”

“Just stay by my side.”

Ji-heon gave a brief response, expressing his honest feelings as he wrapped his arm around Jeong-oh’s shoulder and pulled her closer.

Jeong-oh recalled what Ye-na had said to her in her sleep last night.

“So please don’t leave me, Mom.”

How could it be that they resembled each other so much, father and daughter?

Ch76 - Incredible!

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Jeong-oh smiled warmly as Ji-heon carefully said, “But someday, we might have to do a paternity test for Ye-na.”

“I’m okay with it. I understand that it’s a legal procedure,” Jeong-oh nodded lightly. However, one thing weighed on her mind.

“But it’s not about me. It’s about Ye-na.”

As Jeong-oh pointed this out, Ji-heon’s shoulders visibly drooped.

“Ye-na is very perceptive. If she hears about the paternity test, it might hurt her feelings.”

“Right. Ye-na is important…”

Ye-na is important. Ye-na is important…

In his mouth, the phrase “Ye-na is important” felt like a prayer.

***

It was a busy morning before heading to work.

Despite everything that happened, Ji-heon went to work looking unfazed. As he reached his office, Secretary Yoon Ae-ra stood up to greet him.

“Director, you’re here.”

“Yes, hello.”

“Um, Director…”

Yoon cautiously called out to Ji-heon as he was about to enter his office. He turned to her.

“There’s something I forgot to mention yesterday…”

Actually, it wasn’t that she had forgotten; she had hesitated to speak up about it but finally mustered the courage to say it. It felt like she couldn’t delay any longer.

“Two nights ago, Mrs. Jang Young-mi requested a photo of our team member, Jeong-oh Lee. So… I had no choice but to send it.”

“……”

Ji-heon narrowed his eyes, lost in thought.

‘Yoon sent my mother a picture of Jeong-oh…’

If that were the case, then part of his mother’s explanation would indeed be true. The claim that Chae Eun-bi had revealed the name “Jeong-oh Lee,” leading his mother to inquire about her.

Does this mean that the attempted kidnapping incident regarding Ye-na really isn’t connected to his mother?

‘Then what about Chae Eun-yeob?’

How much does Chae Eun-yeob really know?

Although he had felt grateful for her help since the hit-and-run seven years ago, now he wondered if he had been used by her all this time.

Still, with Jeong-oh around, the truth would come out soon enough.

“I trusted you, Secretary Yoon. It’s unfortunate that this happened.”

Ji-heon set aside his worries for a moment to chide his secretary, who hung her head, unsure of how to respond.

“I’m sorry.”

“From now on, be careful. Never share information with outsiders.”

“Yes.”

“By ‘outsiders,’ I mean anyone from outside the company, including partner companies. If someone tries to dig for company information, come to me first.”

“Yes, understood.”

As Ji-heon turned to leave after giving a firm warning, he noticed someone peeking from the end of the hallway. It was Seung-kyu.

Curiosity about what he had promised to share made Seung-kyu rush in early that morning.

Ji-heon entered the office with Seung-kyu.

“What’s going on? Why is it so tense in the morning?”

“There’s something going on.”

Seung-kyu, who was looking at Ji-heon with a puzzled expression, quickly changed the subject.

“Hey! You said you’d tell me today. Spill it!”

Seung-kyu had been waiting eagerly for this news for a long time. He couldn’t sleep, anxious to hear what Ji-heon had to share.

Just a few months ago, Seung-kyu had seemed like a man who would remain distant from women, yet now he was not only helping with Jeong-oh but had even mentioned meeting her mother.

This definitely hinted at marriage, so what could be the reason for meeting Jeong-oh’s mother if they didn’t have a child together?

Ji-heon opened the door to this mystery.

“Don’t freak out.”

“Okay, I’m ready. Just tell me.”

“I lost my memory seven years ago. Three years of my life just vanished.”

“Right. But you said your memory is starting to come back.”

“Yeah. And that memory was about Jeong-oh.”

“……You were close with Jeong-oh back then?”

“Not just close.”

“……No way.”

His heart raced, and his vision blurred.

“No way, no way!”

No way!

Thinking back, Ji-heon and Jeong-oh’s first meeting had indeed been strange. Ji-heon had fixated on Jeong-oh’s looks, and she had even grabbed his wrist in front of the elevator.

Jeong-oh must have known. Her reaction was so natural because she had known Ji-heon!

Seung-kyu jumped up from his seat, waving his hands in disbelief.

“Ah! Don’t tell me! I feel like my heart might drop!”

Though it wasn’t his own life, he was so excited by the news that his face turned red.

“Is it real? Is it true?”

“Yeah. Ye-na is my biological daughter…”

“Whoa! No way!”

Oh my, oh my!

Seung-kyu, who was pacing back and forth in disbelief, pressed his hands to his cheeks like someone trapped in a Munch painting. He circled the office twice before hitting his head against the wall.

Incredible! How could this happen!

All sorts of thoughts raced through his mind.

‘Ji-heon was Jeong-oh’s boyfriend? The biological father of Ye-na is Ji-heon? The man whom Do-bin likes is Ye-na’s biological father, Ji-heon? What does this mean? I criticized Jeong-oh for being a single mother. I didn’t think I could wish them well, but thanks to Ji-heon, I managed to avoid censure? No, no, no. If that’s the case, Ye-na is the only granddaughter of a chaebol family. Will Ye-na continue to play with our Do-bin? Won’t she stop coming to our house? What? I was pushing them to be together, and now our Do-bin is the only one left out? Am I, as a father, blocking my son’s future?’

A tangled bundle of thoughts piled up in Seung-kyu’s mind, weighing down his feet. He turned around, looking like he aged several months in those few seconds.

“…Should I congratulate you?”

“Of course. It’s a good thing.”

“It really is, right?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“……”

“Even though I’ve missed a lot of time and my memory isn’t fully back, it’s still a good thing that I can return to how things used to be.”

Jiheon’s expression looked relaxed, but Seungkyu felt uncomfortable in many ways.

“There’s no one else I can talk to about this.”

“Right?”

“…”

“Our Dobin and Yeona will still be able to play together, right?”

Seungkyu asked Jiheon’s response with earnestness, feeling a pitiful sense of being in a subordinate position regarding their children as well.

Unexpectedly, Jiheon let out a sigh.

“Actually, I might need help from Dobin.”

“…”

“Yeona still can’t accept me.”

“Ah… she must be confused.”

“Is that how kids are?”

“It could be. She’s lived her whole life without a dad, so having one drop down like a bomb must be a shock.”

“…”

“Hey, but isn’t it interesting that there’s such a connection?”

“Right. There are fated encounters like this.”

“No, I’m talking about you and me. We’re truly fated. Right? If it weren’t for me, what would you have done? You might not have even been able to play Go with your daughter once.”

“…You’re talking like you’ll never be able to play Go again.”

“Anyway, you must never forget this connection. Right now, Yeona is closer to Dobin than you, so if you need to ask for something, be polite about it. Got it?”

Although he spoke firmly, his voice was infinitely gentle and soft. Seungkyu vowed never to fight with Jiheon again for the rest of his life.

After the storm had passed, Seungkyu, calming himself down, posed a practical question.

“So what will you do about Lee Jeong-oh?”

“Hmm? Why?”

“We should send her to another department. You’re responsible for personnel evaluations, and it’s easy for rumors to spread.”

“Nothing was said about Chae Eun-bi.”

“Chae Eun-bi is different. She had been here before you arrived, and you’re the one giving Lee Jeong-oh her first evaluation.”

“…”

“It’s better to transfer her to another department. For your sake, and for Lee Jeong-oh’s too.”

No.

Jiheon couldn’t accept Seungkyu’s argument.

He couldn’t send Jeong-oh to another department. He was already suppressing his desire to set up a desk for her in this office.

“Park Seungkyu. You know what I’m going to say, right?”

“…”

“Pretend you don’t know.”

He absolutely could not let Lee Jeong-oh be taken to another department.

.....

“Hello, Attorney Hah Jin-cheol. This is Lee Jeong-oh. It’s been a few days since I contacted you.

There was a commotion at the company a little while ago. The C girl I mentioned insulted me in a public place. She screamed in the bathroom, and everyone outside could hear it.

I’ve attached the recording from that time, so please check it. I hope you’ll ensure the attached material doesn’t leak elsewhere. I trust you, and I’m sending it.

Now that I’ve gathered evidence, can we proceed with the lawsuit? Please let me know a convenient time, and I’ll come see you.”

[Is being a single mother a family legacy? Is recklessly living your life genetic? Still, you should have thought about your life and gotten rid of the baby. I’m sure you didn’t want to hear that you take after your mother in living recklessly.]

Eun-yeob roughly sighed after checking the email and attached file from Lee Jeong-oh.

The recording file unmistakably contained Chae Eun-bi’s voice, filled with nauseatingly harsh accusations. Even Eun-yeob thought it was a fitting response.

It was valid material for a lawsuit.

Lee Jeong-oh was a woman he had intended to meet just once. To judge what kind of person she was and what weaknesses she had. He had gained nothing from their previous meeting, and because he had impersonated a fellow lawyer, he had no intention of giving her additional consultations.

If it weren't for his younger sister, Chae Eun-bi, he wouldn't have even bothered.

"I can spare some time during work. Shall we meet at a café at 6 PM? I'll send the address."

Eun-yeob sent a brief reply to Jeong-oh with a heavy heart and waited for a response. Soon after, a confirmation came back.

Then, at 6:20 PM.

Eun-yeob arrived at the café, 20 minutes late for their appointment.

"Attorney."

"I'm sorry for being late. I ended up finishing work later than I thought."

"No, it's fine. I appreciate you meeting with me."

Jeong-oh looked a bit more relaxed than when they first met. She looked somewhat prettier with a healthy complexion.

But she was merely bait to win Jiheon over.

This woman had no idea that the child's grandmother had already done a DNA test using the child's hair.

Eun-yeob smirked slightly and got straight to the point.

"I've reviewed the materials you sent. However, I don't think that C girl would have made such statements out of the blue. Considering the context,

it seems there must have been some incident prior. Did you, Lee Jeong-oh, provide her with a trigger to become excited?”

“Rather than a trigger, that girl visited my mom’s restaurant with her friends. There, she met my daughter and gave her 50,000 won. I only told her that she shouldn’t give such a large sum to a child, but she reacted so violently.”

Eun-yeob’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

That can’t be right, can it? You must have struck first.

“Was there nothing else? For example, did Lee Jeong-oh strike you first?”

“She wouldn’t do that. Not at all.”

“…”

“Why would I do something like that at work? I would just clap my hands alone.”

Eun-yeob knew that her words were lies. It was frustrating to have to remain quiet and pretend not to know the obvious truth.

“…Understood. Let’s go ahead and write the complaint. We can do it here, right?”

“Thank you.”

“Let’s write it quickly and get up.”

Seeing her flushed face, Eun-yeob quietly sneered. He planned to write the complaint very roughly and tamper with the evidence.

“By the way, how many people heard it? Can those people be witnesses?”

“A lot of people heard it, but honestly, I’m not sure.”

“It would make things easier if we had witnesses. What a shame.”

“However, I do have a witness who can testify that C girl has slandered me in the past. It seems they just finished up nearby, so I’ll call them.”

Ah, no, that’s not necessary…

Before Eun-yeob could stop her, Jeong-oh quickly sent a text message and set her phone down.

Having the person come makes him feel uneasy…

“Um, Lee Jeong-oh, I think I should get up now since I suddenly have a call coming in.”

As Eun-yeob sensed the ominous energy and rose from her chair, the café entrance opened, and a person walked in.

“Director, over here!”

Jeong-oh waved her hand eagerly toward the entrance.

Eun-yeob’s face froze as she stood awkwardly at her seat.

In the midst of the café’s stillness, the sound of Jiheon’s footsteps echoed loudly.

Jeong-oh smiled brightly as if to show off, introducing Eun-yeob to Jiheon.

“Director, this is the one. The attorney I was talking about.”

“What? Chae Eun-yeob? The lawyer that Lee Jeong-oh mentioned is you?”

Jiheon sighed, looking at her with an expression of disbelief, as if looking at a mere bug, or something even less significant.

“What are you talking about, Director? This is Attorney Hah Jin-cheol.”

Jeong-oh, like an actor on a stage, loudly and dramatically glanced back and forth between Jiheon and Eun-yeob.

“That’s right, Attorney. Your name is Hah Jin-cheol, isn’t it? Why don’t you say something?”

Even with that clumsy performance, Eun-yeob found herself unable to say a word.

Ch77 - An Eager Unrequited Love

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Eun-yeob fell beautifully into Lee Jeong-oh’s cunning trap. She faced an unprecedentedly embarrassing moment in her life.

“Attorney, why aren’t you speaking? Is your name really not Hah Jin-cheol?”

Jeong-oh pressed on as if she were shocked to finally discover Eun-yeob’s real name, pretending to know nothing.

“I’m very embarrassed right now. Why did you impersonate someone else? Are you really an attorney?”

Of course, Eun-yeob knew that Jeong-oh was pretending.

As Eun-yeob remained silent, Jeong-oh turned to Jiheon and asked, “Director, isn’t Chae Eun-yeob… the brother of Chae Eun-bi?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh my! The person I was going to sue was Chae Eun-bi!”

This ridiculous play continued.

“Then, did you approach me on purpose? To prevent me from suing Eun-bi?”

“…”

“Did Chae Eun-bi ask you to do that?”

“You have a vivid imagination, Lee Jeong-oh. This is sheer absurdity.”

Finally gathering her thoughts, Eun-yeob spoke up.

“When did I say I was Hah Jin-cheol? I’ve been saying from the start that I’m Chae Eun-yeob, but you misheard me, didn’t you?”

There’s no evidence. There shouldn’t be any.

She had only introduced herself as Hah Jin-cheol once at the company desk, and afterward, she never mentioned that name again. It should be easy to silence the desk staff, so if she could just get through this situation well, it would be fine.

“Right! In the lobby of the law firm!”

Jeong-oh exclaimed incredulously.

“I’m quite displeased. You miscalled me on purpose and now you’re trying to pin the blame on me.”

Eun-yeob spoke clearly.

“Moreover, I offered you free consultation, and even took the time out of my busy schedule to meet with you and write the complaint. To have my kindness result in this is just unbelievable.”

“…”

“I felt bitter seeing you repeatedly miscalling my name in emails, but you set this trap and tried to corner me. What exactly is your motive, Lee Jeong-oh?”

“Attorney, I have records of the emails I received, so if you say that…”

As Eun-yeob continued to argue, Jeong-oh picked up her phone. It was clear she was going to shove the email records in her face. Eun-yeob scoffed softly. The emails merely showed that Jeong-oh had called her Hah

Jin-cheol, but there was no direct evidence that Eun-yeob had impersonated anyone.

Realizing this, Jeong-oh's gaze wavered.

"Don't just call someone's name carelessly, Lee Jeong-oh."

As Eun-yeob continued to reprimand her, Jiheon took Jeong-oh's phone.

"To me, it seems you're the one lying, Chae Eun-yeob."

After reviewing all of Jeong-oh's emails, Jiheon said, "If the emails came in this way, shouldn't you correct it? An attorney should be truthful to their clients. If I'm not referred to by my name and am called something else without correction, isn't that a problem? If there is actually someone named Hah Jin-cheol at your firm, you'd be causing harm to that person as well."

As Jiheon pointed out Eun-yeob's lack of sincerity, Eun-yeob clenched her fists.

"If you didn't want it to be interpreted as impersonation, you should have corrected it long ago. Why didn't you? This is damaging to your firm as well."

"…"

"I can't just let this slide now that I know. Convey this to the company: all contracts with Max Planning will be terminated. I cannot work with an untrustworthy attorney."

"…"

"No. I'll contact them directly. I don't trust you to relay it correctly."

"Jiheon, that's not your decision to make. It's the representative of the company who decides that. You're not the representative of Max Planning."

Eun-yeob barely managed to maintain her poker face as she mocked him. Given the situation, there was no need for her to hide her claws anymore.

It was also worth pointing out that a subordinate was stepping in for a director of the division.

“And Jiheon, are you and Lee Jeong-oh particularly close?”

Gathering her belongings and standing tall, Eun-yeob leaned close to Jiheon and whispered in his ear.

“Jiheon, I think you should be careful too. You should choose your friends wisely. What if your mother were to faint in shock?”

“…”

“I’ll be going ahead. I barely managed to carve out some time while on the move. Let’s meet separately later.”

After briefly advising Jiheon, Eun-yeob quickly left the table. Though she pretended to be calm, she was sweating profusely. She walked briskly as if trying not to get caught by them. By the last few steps, she might have even been nearly running.

Once she had moved away from the café and toward the parking lot, Eun-yeob quietly caught her breath and organized her thoughts about what she had seen and heard.

Lee Jeong-oh and Jeong Jiheon. The two were clearly colluding. Jiheon seemed to trust Jeong-oh quite a bit, but it was unclear whether they were in a romantic relationship or not.

When Jeong-oh visited the company last Friday, she likely had no relationship with Jiheon. If they were close, Jeong-oh wouldn’t have come to receive a free consultation.

Had their relationship changed over the week? Had Jeong-oh disclosed the existence of Lee Ye-na to Jiheon? If so, her efforts to swap Lee Ye-na’s hair would have been in vain. Of course, it could cause confusion for a moment.

“Ha, pests!”

Eun-yeob shouted into the air.

Why do they have to make it so complicated?

As soon as it was time to leave work, Seung-kyu jumped up like a bullet and took a taxi home for the first time in a while.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey!”

As he opened the front door, instead of saying “Dad’s home,” he called out “Hey” four times in a row, which felt like a long time since it had happened.

“What, what, what!”

Jin-seo, who was teaching Dobin about organizing his room, rushed into the living room, startled by her husband’s frantic calls.

“Dad!”

“Dad, Dad!”

Dobin and Doyun ran up to greet Seung-kyu.

“Oh. Right, right. Did our Dobin and Doyun listen to Mom?”

While Seung-kyu hugged each of the children, Jin-seo’s eyes widened as she pressed him for answers.

“What’s going on? What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Hah… I have incredible news.”

Seung-kyu replied with eyes full of joy, barely able to contain his excitement.

“What is it? What is it?”

“Ha ha ha.”

Seung-kyu took the two children to the living room to play and pulled Jin-seo into the bedroom.

“Do you know who Ye-na’s biological father is?”

“Who is it? Is it someone I know? A celebrity?”

“Ha ha ha ha.”

“Who is it already?”

“It’s Jeong Jiheon.”

“……Is today April Fool’s Day?”

“No, I’m serious! I heard it directly from Jiheon. He had amnesia and couldn’t remember Lee Jeong-oh, who thought he was heartbroken and was raising Ye-na all by himself.”

“Really? That doesn’t make any sense!”

“I’m telling you, it’s true!”

“Oh my….”

Jin-seo couldn’t close her gaping mouth. Seung-kyu felt a sense of relief wash over him.

“Isn’t it amazing? I must have had some foresight. What would have happened if I hadn’t brought the two of them together?”

“Oh my, what a surprise, what a surprise….”

Jin-seo, with her hand on her startled heart, asked, “Then what happens to Jeong-oh? I heard Jiheon’s mother is a really scary person.”

“It’ll work out. They have a child together. She’s the first granddaughter in that family, after all.”

“Then Jiheon and Jeong-oh will move in together?”

“I haven’t heard that much yet.”

“Ugh… I really hope Jeong-oh has less trouble from now on.”

Jin-seo sighed with relief, praying for peace in Jeong-oh’s family. At that moment, a loud crash echoed from outside.

Jin-seo and Seung-kyu hurried into the living room at the same time.

The freezer door was open, and ice from the ice tray was scattered all over the floor.

“I’m sorry!”

Before Jin-seo could scold him, Dobin took the initiative.

Even though they hadn’t taught him to do that, his earnest hands clasped together in pleading melted Jin-seo’s heart, and she sighed, extending her arms.

As she reached out, Dobin flinched, thinking he was about to be scolded, which made him both pitiable and lovable.

“Son, if you want ice in the future, just tell Mom, okay?”

“……Okay.”

“I love you, my son.”

Jin-seo hugged Dobin tightly.

Thinking back, if Dobin hadn’t liked Ye-na so much, she might have followed Seung-kyu’s words and ended her relationship with Jeong-oh. It turned out the foresight was in her son.

“Love you, love you, love you, love you.”

“Mom, why are you like this? Did you accidentally throw away my toy again?”

Dobin, confused as to why he wasn’t being scolded after spilling the ice, asked Jin-seo.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After returning to the office to finish the tasks left undone, Jeong-oh left work with Jiheon.

She hadn’t pressed Eun-yeob any further at the café. As expected, Eun-yeob acted shrewdly and quickly escaped the trap.

“Well, at least Chae Eun-yeob won’t approach you anymore, so that’s settled. Mother is worried, though…”

“Mom will definitely be cautious. I showed her the black box footage of Chae Eun-yeob. She may have been stubborn in front of me, but as time passes, her suspicions will grow.”

“Yeah, I’m glad.”

“You did really well today.”

“Right? I think I’m a great actor.”

“Seriously. You could be a professional.”

Jiheon was sincere. To Jiheon, who tended to believe whatever Jeong-oh said, her performance today must have seemed exceptional. In the warm atmosphere, Jiheon revealed what had happened earlier that day.

“I told Seung-kyu everything about Ye-na.”

“Then soon, Dobin’s whole family will find out?”

“They probably already know. He must have been itching to tell Jin-seo.”

“Everyone will be really surprised.”

“If Seung-kyu is making a big fuss at work for no reason, let me know.”

Jiheon recalled that Seung-kyu had been quite surprised that morning in the office and mentioned it to Jeong-oh. Jeong-oh, lost in thought, tilted her head and asked, “You’ve been friends with Deputy Park Seung-kyu for a long time, right? Why didn’t you introduce me to him seven years ago?”

“…….”

“You said you didn’t introduce anyone, friend or otherwise.”

At Jeong-oh’s pointed question, Jiheon’s smile faded.

“Yeah, why was that?”

“…….”

“Were you worried I’d be taken away from you?”

“Huh? You must have been dating Jin-seo back then.”

“Oh, I guess so?”

“……”

“Were you still worried?”

Jiheon extended his right hand, brushing against Jeong-oh’s hair and earlobe, muttering to himself. After days of digging into the past and dealing with Ye-na’s situation, he had been close to Jeong-oh but hadn’t been able to hug her freely.

It was the same now. As he playfully tickled her, she quickly changed the subject to lighten the mood.

“What are you doing this weekend?”

“Nothing. No plans.”

Jiheon declared nonchalantly, knowing he could cancel any schedule if she wanted him to.

“Okay. Then let’s play with Ye-na. The more she sees your face, the sooner she’ll warm up to you.”

At Jeong-oh’s suggestion, Jiheon felt his strength leave his arms.

Would Ye-na really want to play if I asked her…?

To Jiheon, Ye-na was the most intimidating person in the world—more so than the chairman of the group or his mother-in-law. It was a desperate, unrequited love from a man who had always lived with pride.

The car Jiheon and Jeong-oh were in arrived at the market just in time. Jeong-oh opened the restaurant door first. The dining area of the restaurant, which had closed for the day, was dark.

“I’m back!”

“Mommy!”

Hearing Jeong-oh’s voice, Ye-na ran out and, spotting Jiheon who had followed her in, tightened her lips.

“Hi, Ye-na.”

Hmph.

Ye-na turned her head away, heading towards the kitchen.

“Oh, you’re here?”

In the kitchen, Guk-soon welcomed them as she peered through the entrance. Jiheon politely greeted her.

“Yes, hello.”

Jeong-oh poked Jiheon’s side awkwardly as he entered the kitchen, signaling him to talk to Ye-na.

Jiheon quickly understood and cautiously perched himself on the bench, addressing Ye-na.

“Ye-na, how about we… go bike riding on Saturday?”

“Go bike riding with Dad.”

At Jiheon’s question, Ye-na’s eyes widened as she looked at him, then left the bench to tug on Guk-soon’s pants.

“Grandma, can we go to Gunsan on Saturday?”

“Do you want to go to Gunsan, my dear?”

“Yes. I want to go. Grandma from the restaurant said she wants to see Ye-na, too.”

After successfully persuading her grandmother, Ye-na turned to Jeong-oh and said, “Mom, let’s go to Gunsan together.”

Jiheon had no place in this conversation.

He could only watch as Ye-na flashed a bright smile at her, unable to relax his own smile directed at her.

Right now, my smile doesn’t even feel like a smile.

Ch78 - Will That Day Come?

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Jeong-oh and Jiheon had dinner at Guk-soon’s restaurant.

Ye-na, who had already eaten, sat next to Jeong-oh, continuously trying to engage her in conversation. There was one reason for this: to prevent Jeong-oh and Jiheon from talking to each other.

Thanks to his rather unkind daughter, Jiheon had no choice but to endure a lonely meal, eating in silence.

Even when it was time to leave after cleaning up the restaurant, Ye-na insisted on walking instead of getting in Jiheon’s car. In the end, Jiheon said goodbye to everyone in front of the restaurant.

Another day without any progress.

However, Jiheon couldn’t bring himself to leave and drove his car in front of Jeong-oh’s house.

He thought it might be better to look for a room nearby since he would be coming and going every morning and evening anyway.

‘Or maybe not. Should I wait a little longer?’

Eventually, he would get married, so it would be better to find a place where they could all live together.

‘Should I buy a building and renovate it?’

What started as a simple thought about getting a room had now evolved into considering purchasing a house and even hiring a contractor for renovations.

As his mind raced ahead, his heart naturally followed. Thinking about life in a new house filled him with excitement and warmth.

A pretty wife, a caring mother, and a cute daughter, all of whom would be even happier in a new home.

A cute daughter…

The daughter who had continuously turned away from him led him back into the depths of despair.

Would there really come a day when we could live in the same house, laughing and chatting together? Would that day truly come?

‘Maybe she takes after her mom; she really makes her dad worry a lot.’

Just like Jeong-oh, Jiheon thought that Jeong-oh and Ye-na resembled each other.

He received a message from Jeong-oh after 10 PM.

[Did you get home?]
“No. I’m in front of the villa.”

[What? Ugh, I can’t stand this.]
Saying she couldn’t stand it, Jeong-oh immediately ran out. As soon as Jiheon reunited with her, he asked about Ye-na first.

“Is Ye-na asleep?”

“Yeah. That’s why I came out.”

Hoo. Jiheon let out a heavy sigh and looked at Jeong-oh.

Seeing his pitiful gaze, Jeong-oh asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, just…”

“……”

“I’m jealous.”

Jeong-oh chuckled softly.

“Is it because Ye-na only likes me?”

“Yeah.”

“Someday, you and Ye-na will be partners. You both have similar tastes.”

Jeong-oh encouraged him with kind words, seeming to understand his feelings. Jiheon smiled bitterly.

***

Will that day really come?

“Honestly, I’ve never felt jealous of anyone in the world. But you have everything I could be envious of: Lee Jeong-oh, Lee Ye-na, and your mother.”

“Are you jealous of my mom too?”

“Of having such a good family.”

Jiheon’s answer made Jeong-oh feel deeply moved.

I want to become part of your family soon.

Even though he had a lot, he sometimes looked so sorrowful as if he had nothing, and she wanted to love this man a lot.

The Next Day.

Jeong-oh went to work with Jiheon as usual.

Seeing Jiheon looking dejected after meeting Ye-na, who had been so cold to him, made her feel pity. Since she thought that for the balance of their family dynamics, if the daughter was cold, the mother should be warm, she agreed to accompany him to the office.

Even though it felt like he was deliberately acting pitiful to lead her into the car.

“Here, here! Let me off here.”

Still, she had to be cautious. Jeong-oh insisted that Jiheon park stubbornly near the office.

“This will look even stranger. Just say we met nearby…”

“Thanks. I’ll see you at the office later.”

Ignoring Jiheon’s persuasion, Jeong-oh got out of the car and hurriedly walked away.

As Jiheon followed closely, he noticed her fierce gaze, and he eventually drove off first. Jeong-oh sighed and looked around, checking for any colleagues who might be nearby.

And, as expected, he spotted Assistant Manager Go Eun-joo in the back. Her hair stood on end.

‘Did she see? What if she did?’

Assistant Manager Go had an expression that showed little change. Even after noticing Jeong-oh, she looked as if it was too much trouble to run over, simply waving her hand as she walked elegantly toward them.

Her every step exuded a certain aloof grace. As she waited for Eun-joo, Jeong-oh felt cold sweat trickling down her back.

“Good morning, Assistant Manager Go.”

“Not really.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to go to the office.”

She didn’t see me!

Her typical sardonic response filled Jeong-oh with gratitude. Although she wanted to sprinkle flower petals on Eun-joo’s path, she couldn’t express it too openly, so Jeong-oh settled for making small talk while internally sighing in relief.

“Haha, right? At least today is Friday, so that’s a relief. We can rest comfortably this week.”

“Who knows?”

“……”

“I have a feeling we’ll be working over the weekend.”

However, Eun-joo’s response remained cold until the end.

Then, an hour later, Jeong-oh realized that Assistant Manager Go Eun-joo had excellent instincts. The AE in charge of Dawan Liquor rushed in.

“Team Leader, have you seen this?”

The AE, holding a tablet PC, showed the screen to Mi-ran. Deputy Manager Park Young-gwang and Jeong-oh also stood beside Mi-ran.

It was an advertisement for a new beer product. However, the package design was very similar to the new product being prepared by Dawan Liquor.

Although the brand image was different, the design wrapping the brand was similar enough to cause confusion at first glance. The advertiser hadn’t registered the package design as a trademark, so it wasn’t protected by law.

“This is a product launching today and will be widely available in stores nationwide. The advertisement will air on all media tonight at 10 PM.”

Mi-ran rubbed her forehead in exasperation. Because the advertiser had failed to decide on the package design, the filming for the advertisement had already been delayed, and now this issue had arisen just after the design was finalized.

“This being a new product makes it even more problematic. Does the advertiser know?”

“Of course. They’re probably in a meeting right now.”

The AE answered Jeong-oh’s question.

“Does the director know?”

At Mi-ran’s inquiry, the AE shook his head.

“Let’s go see them together.”

Mi-ran took the lead, and the AE followed. The remaining team members exchanged gloomy glances.

After modifying the package design more than ten times and barely passing the advertisement draft, such a disaster occurring just two days before filming on Tuesday was frustrating.

In thirty minutes, Team Leader Mi-ran and the AE returned with Jiheon.

“We’ve decided to change the package. We can remove everything except the trademark. However, the designer will send a reference color, so they ask us to use that for the color. We need to send the first draft by 6 PM tonight. Let’s try to get approval in one go if possible.”

Jiheon spoke decisively. Sighs could be heard from all directions. The weekend was about to vanish just like that.

Jeong-oh also felt disappointed. She wouldn’t be able to keep her promise to go to Gunsan with Ye-na. Realizing this, Jiheon quietly spoke to Jeong-oh, who was heading to the conference room.

“Just go.”

“Excuse me? Where?”

“Go to Gunsan and don’t work this weekend. This isn’t a task that requires a copywriter.”

“Ugh, Director. Let’s keep work and personal life separate!”

The advertiser was likely so picky that they’d want to modify the TV ad every time the package changed, so it wasn’t necessary.

Jeong-oh, frustrated by Jiheon’s favoritism, entered the meeting.

After finalizing the campaign concept and advertisement drafts, the Production Team 1, which had stepped back, also attended the meeting.

“It’s easy to say, but how are we supposed to change it in just a few hours?”

Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob complained. His frustration wasn’t aimed at the team members but at the client.

Everyone else felt the same way. They had already gone through numerous production meetings, and the ideas were running low.

After a long silence, Mi-ran was the first to speak up.

“We’ll have to add color or patterns around the trademark. This is tough. If we make it too eye-catching, they’ll say we’re ruining the identity, and if we make it less visible, it’ll feel like we did nothing.”

“Ah, how about fake art!”

Drawing inspiration from Mi-ran’s suggestion, Jeong-oh spoke up.

“What if we use fake art, which looks like the brand logo from a distance but reveals a message or other images up close? I think it would fit well with our ad.”

“Hmm, that could work if done well.”

Deputy Manager Park Young-gwang supported Jeong-oh’s idea. Eun-joo and Gi-hun nodded, seeming to agree.

“I’ll give it a try.”

“Alright. Let’s create it and talk again later. I’ll report to the director,” Mi-ran instructed. Thanks to Mi-ran and Jeong-oh, the meeting concluded quickly, although for the designers, it was just beginning.

After the meeting, as Jeong-oh was tidying up the foam board with the previous product package draft attached, Gi-hun approached her.

“Let me take that. I’ll clean it up.”

“No, hurry and go work on your part. You need to take care of yourself, Gi-hun.”

“Oh, this is nothing.”

Gi-hun easily snatched the stack of foam boards from Jeong-oh’s hands.

“Honestly, when I first saw that ad, I was blank, but thanks to you, I feel like I got a spark of inspiration. I truly admire you, Jeong-oh.”

Though he said “admire,” there was more affection and admiration in his eyes than respect.

“Not at all. It’s nothing.”

Jeong-oh awkwardly replied.

Eun-joo silently watched the two. She felt a bit sorry for Gi-hun.

Every time she saw Assistant Manager Lee Jeong-oh, his mouth would be agape, and there were stars in his eyes.

What to do, that’s love.

Song Gi-hun, you’re going to get hurt like that.

“Assistant Go, do you have something to say?”

Noticing Eun-joo’s suspicious gaze, Gi-hun asked. Eun-joo shook her head.

“No. I don’t.”

Fine. It’s not my business anyway.

She didn’t want to be the one meddling in someone else’s complicated love life. At work, she just wanted to focus on her tasks, but she almost fell into the folly of thinking of her teammates as family due to Assistant Lee Jeong-oh’s strange influence.

Ugh. I’ve been too sentimental lately. Individualism is much more comfortable.

Eun-joo shrugged and left first.

The draft sent at 6 PM received feedback relatively quickly. However, it wasn’t approved in one go. The advertiser said they would review the second draft in the morning. The designers were stuck with overtime.

The other team members discussed the rationale for incorporating fake art and the modifications needed for the advertisement due to the package change. Jeong-oh wouldn’t be able to leave until after 10 PM.

Jiheon, who had disappeared for a while, was waiting for Jeong-oh with his car parked in front of the company. Jeong-oh quickly ran to the car, trying to avoid being seen.

“Quick, quick, let’s go. Fast!”

As soon as she got in the car, Jeong-oh shouted while lowering her seat back. Jiheon chuckled at Jeong-oh’s behavior and started the car.

Only after they had driven far from the company did Jeong-oh raise her seat back again.

“I just got a call that Ye-na is asleep. Why were you waiting if you weren’t going to see her anyway?”

“Still, I should take you home. And…”

Jiheon answered Jeong-oh’s question as if it were obvious, then cleared his throat. Jeong-oh instinctively sensed that Jiheon was about to broach a delicate topic.

“Can I go in for just a moment?”

“Huh? To our house?”

“Can I just take a quick look at Ye-na while she’s sleeping and then come out?”

The director, who had always shown a stern and reliable demeanor at the office, now looked like a soft-hearted beast, waiting for her permission with shining eyes.

Ch79 - I Won't Give You Anything

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Jeong-oh couldn’t help but smile. Yet at the same time, she felt a pang of sympathy for Jiheon, as she understood his longing.

The sight of Ye-na sleeping. That was irresistible.

“Phew.”

“If it’s too hard…”

“No, I totally understand you, Oppa.”

“…”

“I’ve seen Ye-na sleeping more than a thousand times, and I still can’t get enough of it. She’s truly an angel.”

The truth was, she had a hobby of teasing sleeping Ye-na—holding her hand, brushing her cheek, even giving her kisses—but she couldn’t say that out loud. She felt that Jiheon might secretly try the same and quickly get addicted.

“But are you sure? Once you see her, you’ll keep thinking about it. You’ll want to come over all the time.”

“Can I just take one picture?”

“That’s not allowed. I can’t turn on the light just to take a picture of the child while she’s sleeping. I can’t use the flash either.”

“Ah, that’s true.”

With the mother’s refusal, Jiheon’s worries deepened.

“I’ll ask Mom first.”

Jeong-oh immediately contacted Guk-soon. She knew Guk-soon would understand Jiheon. After clicking her tongue at how pitiful Jiheon was about twenty times, Guk-soon quickly told him to come in.

Once Guk-soon’s permission was granted, the car sped up, arriving in front of Jeong-oh’s house in no time. The two quietly climbed the stairs and opened the front door. Guk-soon was waiting in the living room.

Jiheon greeted her first.

“Hello, Mother. How have you been?”

“Yeah. We see each other often.”

“Sorry for coming so late.”

“It’s fine. Come on in.”

Jiheon cautiously took off his shoes and entered.

It was the first day he would meet sleeping Ye-na. He promised himself he would only take a brief look at her face as he entered the room. Jeong-oh opened the door for him.

Inside the dark room, some light filtered through the slightly open door, allowing him to see the child sleeping peacefully.

Her white cheeks, eyelashes neatly closed between her shut eyes, her plump lips gently closed, and the cute sound of her breath. Everything made Jiheon’s heart flutter.

She really is a baby angel.

Jiheon sighed quietly.

When he was seven, Jiheon often woke up from nightmares, sometimes dreaming of fighting monsters or falling off a cliff while being chased. His parents told him those were dreams about growing taller.

Even now, he occasionally has those “growing taller” dreams. His growth has already stopped.

Jiheon wished for the child’s dreams to be peaceful. He would protect her from all the storms of the world, but he couldn’t do anything in her dreams.

As he quietly watched, the child’s fingers twitched, and without realizing it, Jiheon placed his finger on her tiny palm.

Ye-na grabbed Jiheon’s finger tightly. A tingling sensation spread throughout his body. He wanted to stay connected to her little hand like that forever. It felt like he could spend the whole night like this.

It was a night that made leaving feel bittersweet.

Determined, Jiheon stood up. He earnestly hoped that one day checking on his daughter while she slept would become part of his routine.

As he quietly closed the door behind him, Guk-soon asked, “Would you like some fruit?”

“No, that’s okay.”

“Eat something before you go.”

The table was already filled with fruit. Unable to refuse any longer, Jiheon sat at the table. Jeong-oh, who had just washed her hands, went to the kitchen cheerfully.

“Hey, I just washed my hands! If I had known this would happen, I wouldn’t have washed them!”

“If you’ve washed them, then don’t eat.”

“Come on. How can I not eat when our lady prepared this for us?”

“She didn’t prepare it for you.”

“Come on. If I don’t eat, you’ll worry that I’m sick or something, asking why I can’t eat when there’s fruit right in front of me.”

“Why would I worry about you? You’d probably be the kind of kid who could catch and eat a cow if left alone in the countryside for a few days.”

Jeong-oh didn’t respond, as she knew the truth in Jiheon’s words.

Jiheon rolled his eyes quickly, quietly listening to the conversation between the mother and daughter.

So, this is what Lee Jeong-oh is like at home.

In front of her mother, Jeong-oh was much more charming and lively than Jiheon knew. It was a cozy scene that couldn’t even compare to Jiheon’s family, which was full of obsession and control. He felt small despite having so much, in this peaceful and warm night.

“Eat up. Eat a lot. You’ll need to drive back.”

Guk-soon brushed off Jeong-oh’s teasing affection and placed fruit on Jiheon’s plate. Jiheon accepted everything Guk-soon offered. Guk-soon watched Jiheon eat with satisfaction and said, “What are we going to do? Suddenly everything has happened. I already booked train tickets for tomorrow.”

“We should exclude Jeong-oh from…”

“She should go with me and Ye-na.”

Guk-soon’s worry was drowned out by Jeong-oh’s words. Jiheon wanted to exclude Jeong-oh from working on the weekend, but Jeong-oh’s will was steadfast. Guk-soon nodded as if she understood.

“Right. It can’t be helped. My friend who lives in Jeonju also said she wants to come see Ye-na, so I have to go.”

Jiheon felt his head naturally bow in humility. Guk-soon, noticing Jiheon’s demeanor, spoke casually.

“Hey, you don’t need to feel guilty like a sinner. This isn’t the first time this has happened.”

“Yes…”

“You two can spend some good time together while Ye-na is away.”

Surprised by Guk-soon’s open-mindedness, Jiheon shyly replied, “…No, that’s not true.”

With a voice that was unexpectedly small for his large frame, Guk-soon couldn’t help but chuckle secretly.

This kid. I can guess how you managed to win Jeong-oh over, but now you’re pretending to be innocent in front of me.

***

Early Morning.

Yena woke up before her mother and nudged her awake.

“Mom, mom, wake up! It’s morning!”

In her dream, Yena was celebrating Christmas. Just like her friends at daycare said, she shouted that Santa Claus was fake, but the Santa in her dream laughed heartily and said he was real, so she should touch him.

Yena tugged at Santa’s long beard. The beard didn’t come off. Realizing that Santa was truly real, Yena cheered and took his hand. His hand was big and warm, making her feel secure.

It was a really wonderful and happy dream. That’s why she felt good from the morning.

“Mom, hurry up and get ready! We have to go to Gunsan! Wake up!”

At Yena’s insistence, Jeong-o reluctantly got out of bed.

“Yena, I have something to tell you.”

“……”

“Mom can’t go to Gunsan with you today.”

Her previously excited voice quickly turned dark.

“Why?”

“I have work at the office and can’t go. But our princess will have fun enough for both of us, right?”

With tears brimming in her eyes, Yena pressed her mother.

“Why can’t you go? Did Uncle make you work again?”

“No, it’s not related to Dad. It’s because I have a lot of work.”

Jeong-o insisted on referring to him as “Uncle,” while she stubbornly called him “Dad.”

To Yena, everything felt sorrowful.

She had a happy dream about Santa Claus, but reality was despairing.

Yet Yena also knew she couldn’t make a big fuss on a normal weekend, not a holiday like Children’s Day, Christmas, or her birthday. She swallowed her sorrow with minimal complaints.

“Mom, don’t play with Uncle. Okay?”

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

As soon as Jeong-o left for work, Yena burst into tears again. Guksun, who had hidden some ice cream, took it out and managed to calm Yena down.

Would they be able to go to Gunsan today?

Jeong-o stepped out of the house with heavy steps. As expected, Jihun was waiting in front of her house. It had only been a few hours since they last met. Feeling both happy and sorry, Jeong-o frowned.

“Why are you here today?”

“I need to go to work with you.”

“It’s a job to come this way every day. It would be better if you just moved here.”

Thinking seriously about it, Jihun smiled brightly.

“Yena must be very disappointed that she can’t go.”

Jeong-o almost mentioned that Yena had cried earlier but held her tongue. She was concerned that Jihun might mix personal feelings into a professional setting.

The two arrived at the office without being late.

The competitive presentation was over, and they thought they could take a breather, but there was weekend work ahead.

At least the clients were giving prompt feedback.

Eunju and Gihun polished the package proposal and sent it to the client early in the morning, who seemed roughly satisfied. After exchanging detailed opinions, they wrapped up the fourth draft, allowing the production team to go home by 6 PM.

Seizing the opportunity, Jihun approached Jeong-o.

“Lee Jeong-o, you’re off work, right?”

“Yes, Director.”

“Shall we go to my place today?”

Ahhhh! You rascal, Director!

Jeong-o looked around anxiously, wondering if anyone nearby had heard that. Fortunately, no one was around, but she couldn’t let Jihun’s reckless statement slide.

“I’m not going! Absolutely not!”

Jeong-o glared and scolded in a small voice. To Jihun, it looked like an adorable tantrum.

He had pretended to make a suggestion, but in reality, it was a notification. Since his mother had also approved and said to have a good time, she couldn’t just ignore that valuable advice. She felt she couldn’t let him sleep alone.

Leaving behind the growling Jeong-o, Jihun turned and signaled with his eyes. He meant he would be waiting in front of the office.

Feeling pressured by Jihun’s assertiveness, Jeong-o quickly moved. She was frustrated that her slow actions could lead to someone outside the office spotting Jihun.

“Wow, Jeong Jihun, I swear!”

After finishing her work and rushing out, Jeong-o opened the door to Jihun’s parked car, huffing.

“Are you doing this on purpose? Wanting others to find out?”

This man was someone who could pull off such a thing.

Besides, no matter how much she roared, he wouldn’t reflect on his shamelessness.

Seeing him drive casually while pretending nothing was wrong, she felt an urge to slap him. But she couldn’t hit someone who was driving.

“Oppa, when we get to your house…”

Jeong-o came up with a clever idea and spoke softly.

“I was going to give you an amazing gift, but since you’re so careless, the thought has completely vanished.”

Indeed, she could see Jihun’s eyes widen in surprise.

“…Huh?”

“I’m not giving you anything.”

“What?”

“I said I’m not giving it to you, the gift.”

“You have to give it. You can’t just plan to give it and then not give it.”

But trying to hide his flustered feelings, he didn’t raise his voice. He chose to persuade her very gently. Yet Jeong-o would never bend her will.

“Here it is. I’m not giving it to you.”

“That won’t do.”

“Serves you right. I have to be in a good mood to give you a gift, but I’m not feeling it right now.”

“…I was wrong.”

He finally relented after a delay. Jeong-o raised her lips triumphantly and asked firmly.

“What did you do wrong?”

“Telling you to come to our house from the office.”

“Then what will you do in the future?”

“…I’ll be careful about acting friendly at the office.”

“Really? Can I trust you?”

“You can trust me.”

Haha! Jeong-o let out a hearty laugh that she had been holding back for a while. Easily tamed, Jihun let out a deep sigh.

When they arrived in front of Jihun’s house, it had already turned to dusk. The two parked the car in the underground parking lot and moved together.

Perhaps because it was a high place where the elevator had to go up a lot, just like the first time she visited, Jeong-o felt a bit nervous again.

Knowing how this man would change in a space where they were alone, her heart might be reacting to that memory.

It seemed like he was staring at her longer than usual, and his gaze felt about ten degrees warmer.

Since the silence felt somewhat uncomfortable, Jeong-o forced a smile and spoke.

“Should I give you the gift now? It’s in my bag.”

“You don’t need to prepare such things. We have plenty at our house.”

Jeong-o’s nostrils flared in annoyance.

“…Oppa, what do you think the gift is?”

Ch80 - The Gift

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Jihun answered as if it were obvious.
“Isn’t it Lee Jung-oh?”

“What?”

Wow. Jihun is such a fool.

He doesn’t seem like it; he often appears smart when working, but when it’s just the two of them, he seems surprisingly simple-minded.

“Why would I be a gift? I’m a person.”

His eyes, meeting a challenging task, slowly became vacant.

No, Lee Jung-oh is the most precious and gift-like person in my life…

Jihun couldn’t even guess what she was trying to give him as a gift. He also had the desire to decide the gift on his own terms.

“But you said it was an amazing gift.”

Aside from Lee Jung-oh, what could possibly be so great?

If it’s not you, there’s nothing I need right now.

“It is an amazing gift.”

“What is it?”

Jihun asked grumpily, not really curious about a gift that wasn’t Lee Jung-oh.

Jung-oh leaned in deeply, rummaging through her bag. Her hand stopped inside the bag. She had found the gift.

Seeing her expression, bright and cheerful as if she were the one receiving a gift, made him curious about something he hadn’t cared about before.

What could it be?

“Ta-da.”

Jung-oh beamed as she held out a photo right in front of him. Jihun took the photo from her.

So this is it.

A photo taken seven years ago at the restaurant “The Crown” in Australia.

“We deleted all our photos a long time ago. Thanks to the restaurant owner, I managed to recover one.”

“Ah. Because of this photo…”

A sigh escaped him, but he couldn’t get mad. The two figures captured in the photo looked so friendly, almost like siblings, and they even seemed to resemble each other slightly.

Even after they got off the elevator, he continued to fidget with the photo for a long time before Jung-oh asked,
“What’s wrong? Don’t you like it?”

“No.”

“…?”

“I’m just happy to see how happy I look in the photo.”

I smiled like this. I was someone who could smile like this.

In what I thought was a blank past, where there was nothing to remember, there was this brilliant smile living on.

“Back then, you were traveling in Australia, but you canceled all your subsequent plans and rented an apartment to stay in Melbourne until you returned home.”

Jihun nodded quietly. He had once looked through records of his trip to Australia seven years ago. Melbourne seemed to be his last destination, but the records showed only a three-day stay at a hotel there, which had puzzled him.

For the next three weeks, there was no record of where he stayed, which had intrigued him.

He guessed he didn’t remember it, but he could guess the reason.

You probably didn’t want to part with me. You must have canceled your plans because you wanted to spend more time together.

Maybe I also fell for you at first sight back then.

As Jihun was lost in thought, Jung-oh handed him another gift.

“And, looking at this will make you even happier.”

It was a real gift that she had longed to give him for a long time.

“I brought Yeona’s history.”

It was a USB memory stick containing photos of Yeona.

Jung-oh and Jihun sat on the living room sofa, flipping through Yeona’s photos on the large TV screen. Jung-oh had organized the photos well, allowing Jihun to see Yeona’s growth over time.

Although Jung-oh had seen these photos dozens of times, for Jihun, it was his first time, and it took a long time for him to go through each picture. Jung-oh wondered if they would be able to see all the photos today.

Even the awkward photo of a newborn baby that looked like a red sweet potato was captivating for Jihun.

There were not only photos but also many videos. Yeona crying, Yeona laughing, Yeona babbling, Yeona flipping over… All the adorable moments of Yeona held Jihun's attention, not letting go.

When Yeona smiled, Jihun smiled too, and when she cried, he felt like he would cry as well. No, it felt like tears would flow at every moment. Before he knew it, tears were welling up in his eyes, making his vision blurry. He pulled a tissue close to him.

"Yeona received so much love. Her mom spoiled her a lot in your place."

As Jung-oh flipped through a photo of Yeona with a lady from a restaurant in Gunsan, she said,
"The restaurant ladies all doted on her like their own granddaughter. Whenever she cried, they would all take turns holding and playing with her. That's why our Yeona learned to talk quickly and is so charming."

Mrs. Lee had told Jihun not to hate himself or to blame himself, but it was undeniably regretful to have missed all those beautiful moments. If only she could, she would love to hug Yeona tightly right there in the photo.

But imagining a cuter and more beautiful child outside the photo…

She couldn't help but feel tears streaming down her face.

In the midst of it all, the photo suddenly stopped.

"Oh? Didn't you bring all the photos?"

Jung-oh leaned forward to closely check the folders on the USB. Then, she let out a deep sigh. There had been a mistake.

“I left my seat in the middle of transferring the files. I think the computer froze. I’ll bring it again. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. If you had brought everything, I wouldn’t have slept for days. Let’s look at the ones we’ve already seen.”

At Jihun’s suggestion, Jung-oh replayed the photo files. However, this time, instead of the initial photo, a new one appeared. A few photos were stored outside the folder. They were ultrasound photos of Yeona during her time in the womb.

“Oh, this is a photo of our Yeona when she was still in my belly.”

Jung-oh went to the hospital after 15 weeks of pregnancy. She had felt scared being alone, so she had only started preparing after telling her mother.

To Jung-oh, it felt like yesterday when she first met Yeona six years ago, a moment that was still vivid.

Through the 3D ultrasound, she saw Yeona’s image. The baby was bravely building a little world within her mother’s body, moving its tiny limbs. It felt so precious and lovely.

“I’m here, Mom. You’re not alone,” it seemed to whisper. It was the first time Jung-oh had felt the comfort of life. Remembering that moment made her heart swell.

With the fetal image still in his mind, Jihun moved closer to Jung-oh.

“It must have been really hard.”

“…”

“Thank you.”

It wasn’t gratitude toward the adorable Yeona but rather toward Jung-oh.

Jihun, sitting closely and crossing his legs, pulled her waist in closer. His calm and gentle voice seemed to caress her hair as he spoke softly.

Though his voice was gentle, his lips were not so restrained. During a few deep kisses that he couldn’t share in front of Yeona, the less restrained one suddenly touched her lower belly.

As their lips parted, he repeated the same words.
“Thank you, really.”

“Isn’t it strange for someone who’s grateful to have such clumsy hands?”

Jeong-o chuckled as she pointed it out. In the midst of it all, her upper body was sinking down in the direction Jeong-hyun was approaching.

“That’s because you really don’t know how to be bad.”

“……”

“This is a reward.”

Eventually, her head touched the floor. Ji-hun gazed longingly at her slender waist, as if checking the spot where the child had been. Just as his large hand, which wrapped around her flat stomach, was about to move higher.

Suddenly, his phone vibrated loudly. Jeong-o jumped up and dashed to where she had left her bag. Ji-hun didn’t have time to stop her.

“Mom, mom.”

Being in a situation where she had entrusted her young daughter to her mother, Jeong-o couldn’t relax for a moment. In truth, she was always on standby to rush to her daughter Yena at any moment.

“Hello.”

[I’m at work, right?]

He could hear the tired tone of Guk-soon’s voice from the other end.

“Yeah, yeah. Did you meet up with your friends? Where are you sleeping tonight?”

[Yeah, I met up with my friends, and I’m heading home now. Almost there.]

“Seoul? Why?”

[The kid is throwing a fit about not sleeping in Gunsan. She says she can’t leave her mom alone to sleep. I can’t believe it. She doesn’t think about how much trouble Grandma is having. Where did she get this filial piety from?]

Guk-soon lamented as if it was unbelievable. Jeong-o blankly hung up the phone.

“Yena said she’s not sleeping in Gunsan and is coming home. She’s almost here.”

“……I have to go.”

Ji-hun also stood up. The destiny of a parent is to rush to their child when called. Even amid that, he recalled Yena’s cute face, whining that she wanted to go home, and his heart felt warm.

“Let’s hurry.”

Thinking about it made him want to see her even more.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

Eun-yeob couldn’t hold it in any longer.

Neither Mrs. Jang Yeong-mi nor the driver, Choi, answered the phone. She couldn’t help but suspect that they had blocked her.

The years she had invested in Jeong Ji-hun, the amount she had poured into him—how could all that effort be turned to nothing? Anger towards Jeong-o and Chae Eun-bi surged in her. Eun-yeob couldn’t stay still and went directly to Mrs. Jang Yeong-mi’s residence.

She had a good relationship with the security guard at the entrance, so she had no problem getting inside, but once in the building, they wouldn’t open the door, forcing her to stand there for a long time.

After about ten minutes, it was Mrs. Jang Yeong-mi herself who finally opened the door.

“Hello, mother. How have you been?”

“No need to come in. I’ll go out.”

Yeong-mi responded coldly to Eun-yeob, who greeted her politely, unlike before.

Once outside, Yeong-mi crossed her arms and asked,

“What brings you here?”

“I tried calling about the real estate issue, but since I couldn’t reach you, I came to check in.”

Hearing such a polite answer made her heart waver. However, a word from her son made it impossible to let her guard down. Yeong-mi ended up expressing her feelings of resentment toward Eun-yeob.

“Let me ask you one thing. Did you really tamper with the paternity test results?”

“What are you talking about, mother?”

Eun-yeob had a genuinely clueless expression. If Eun-yeob was indeed unaware, then mentioning the “paternity test” could spark anger in this situation.

“Please be specific, mother. I need to know what you’re talking about to respond appropriately.”

Yeong-mi became flustered by Eun-yeob’s probing.

“A paternity test? Does that mean Ji-hun isn’t the biological son of Chairman Jeong?”

“What nonsense!”

“Then, has a hidden child of yours suddenly appeared? Or maybe Ji-hun’s hidden child?”

“……Enough. Just go. If our Ji-hun finds out, you’ll be in even bigger trouble.”

Yeong-mi waved her hand as if to dismiss the conversation with Eun-yeob.

Eun-yeob’s eyes were filled with tension.

Ji-hun knows everything, huh?

Indeed, both Jeong-o and Ji-hun were in the know.

In that case……

“Mother, I know what you’ve done.”

Eun-yeob had no choice but to employ other tactics.

“Seven years ago, you even involved a voice actor to cut off the relationship between Jeong-o and Ji-hun.”

“……”

“I didn’t want to know about this, but that voice actor is a friend of mine, so I happened to find out.”

Eun-yeob clearly noticed Yeong-mi’s eyes widen in surprise. She had regained her advantageous position.

Eun-yeob nodded as if she understood Yeong-mi’s feelings.

“I understand. Someone like Jeong-o would only be a disgrace to the family.”

“……”

“And now, that very Jeong-o has attached herself to Ji-hun, causing him to break up with Eun-bi. Ji-hun and Eun-bi looked so good together. Eun-bi treated you so well, too.”

In situations like this, a preemptive strike is always advantageous. They needed to finish things quietly before Jeong-o could bring back the paternity test results.

“Oh, Jeong-o was an unwed mother, right? Is the paternity test somehow related to her? Is she claiming to be raising Ji-hun’s biological child? If that’s the case, she’ll somehow manage to manipulate the paternity test results and bring them back to you. She’ll keep doing it until you believe her.”

Yeong-mi’s tightly clenched fist trembled.

“Mother and Ji-hun could end up raising a cuckoo’s chick for the rest of their lives.”

Eun-yeob’s bold assertion left Yeong-mi confused about what was true and what was false.

Ch81 - The Cutest Thing That Saves the World

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As Jeong-o and Ji-heon moved to the parking lot, a vibration echoed. It was Ji-heon's phone. After checking the screen, he hesitated to press the call button, just staring at it, prompting Jeong-o to ask.

"Who is it?"

"My mother."

"Pick up. Should I step aside? Do you want me to go alone?"

"No, it's fine."

As Jeong-o moved a little away, Ji-heon quickly pulled her arm, bringing her back beside him. He then pressed the call button as she had suggested.

"Hey, Ji-heon."

Before Ji-heon could even bring the phone to his ear, the stern voice of Jang Yeong-mi echoed through the line.

"Yes, mother."

"Come home for a bit. Let's talk."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"What else would there be? You must have a lot to say too."

Yeong-mi’s voice was strained as she barely restrained her urgent feelings.

“Eun-yeob came by earlier.”

“Mother, I told you not to meet with Eun-yeob…”

“Everything that girl said is true. I really can’t tell if you’re lying or if Eun-yeob is lying.”

“…”

“You, who used to be so well-behaved and listened well, suddenly broke up with Eun-bi, ignored me, and disrespected me. How can I accept what you say? If that Lee Ye-na isn’t your daughter, do you know what happens to you? You’ll look like a fool. You’ll be a laughingstock. Not only that…”

As Yeong-mi’s provocative words rang in his ears, Ji-heon quickly lowered the call volume.

“Let’s do the test first. A blood test. If the results show you’re related, then we can talk again. I’m against you hanging out with that girl right now.”

It wasn’t a pleasant call. At least it ended quickly, which was a relief.

Jeong-o, who knew about Ji-heon’s family situation, quickly grasped the content of the call.

“Your mother is saying something, huh?”

“…She wants me to do a paternity test quickly. A blood test.”

“I can cooperate, but I’m worried about Ye-na.”

Ji-heon sighed. He was worried that his daughter, who already hated her father, would lose even more points.

After quickly organizing his thoughts, Ji-heon resolutely said, “Let’s do the paternity test later. When Ye-na accepts me.”

“Your mother is going to keep complaining. How do you plan to endure that?”

“It’s fine. I have a way.”

Ji-heon answered confidently so that Jeong-o wouldn’t worry.

The car smoothly sped down the road, soon arriving in front of Jeong-o’s house. As Jeong-o unfastened her seatbelt, Ji-heon cautiously asked, “Can I come in?”

“Of course. You should come in. Hurry and get out.”

At Jeong-o’s response, a smile spread across his lips. His joy resembled that of a child who unexpectedly received pocket money, which made Jeong-o smile in return.

He became increasingly adorable in her eyes for being so moved by the smallest things. If he knew she was thinking that way, he would likely stop smiling.

Thanks to Ji-heon, Jeong-o also began to cherish her daily life. The sight of her child sleeping, the words she casually said, the time spent together—though Ye-na was the most precious princess in the world, there were times Jeong-o inadvertently neglected her amidst the pressures of reality.

There were moments when she was so immersed in work from the company that she only responded after Ye-na called her “Mom” ten times, or when she hurriedly played with her. There were times when she had scolded her daughter for whining about not being able to sleep.

She realized how envious Ji-heon must be of the mundane things she took for granted. This reflection made Jeong-o vow to be a more caring mother to her child.

As Jeong-o opened the front door, her daughter ran towards her.

“Mom!”

“Princess Ye-na!”

In a reunion that was no different from any other day, Jeong-o embraced Ye-na tightly and walked toward the center of the living room, asking, “Did our Ye-na come back from Gunsan just to see Mommy?”

“Yes! I want to sleep with Mommy.”

“But your grandmother must be tired.”

“I was tired too, but I still came back.”

As their mother-daughter conversation continued, Kook-soon, who had been organizing things in the room, came out and asked, “Ye-na, aren’t you going to greet your dad?”

“…Hello.”

Ye-na, skipping the title of “dad” in her greeting, whispered to Jeong-o, “Mom, why did you come back together today?”

“Because Dad said he missed Ye-na.”

Jeong-o also whispered to Ye-na, “You slept with Mommy yesterday and came back from Gunsan to sleep with Mommy today. It’s the same thing. Dad wants to see Ye-na every day.”

Hmph.

Despite Jeong-o’s gentle persuasion, Ye-na remained stubborn.

If he wanted to see her every day, why didn’t he come before? She wanted to question that, but she felt like if she got entangled with her dad, Mommy would hate her, so she said nothing.

With Ye-na clinging to Jeong-o like glue with her stubbornness, Ji-heon spoke up. “Ye-na, shall we play Go?”

But once again, Ye-na flatly refused. “No.”

Hmph. Does he think I only play Go all the time?

“I want to play string games with Mommy. Mommy, let’s play string games.”

“Oh, sure.”

Suddenly chosen as the opponent for the string game, Jeong-o glanced at Ji-heon and brought out some yarn. Since string games are played alternately, her plan was to pass the yarn to Ji-heon after she spun it, allowing all three to play together.

But the problem was that Ji-heon didn’t know how to play the string game.

The yarn returned to Jeong-o after passing through Ye-na’s hands, and she pushed it toward Ji-heon. A tremor shook in Ji-heon’s eyes.

Ye-na looked at him disapprovingly. “Uncle doesn’t know how to play the string game?”

“Ye-na, you should call me Dad.”

At Jeong-o’s correction, Ye-na stubbornly pressed her lips together.

“Our Ye-na is a kind friend who helps others when they are in trouble and teaches friends when they don’t know something. How about being kind to Dad and teaching him how to play the string game?”

Jeong-o gently encouraged Ye-na while passing the yarn. After a long pause, Ye-na reluctantly showed the yarn to Ji-heon, needing to use her toes as both hands were occupied with the yarn.

“Put one finger here, and another finger here. You need to put one in each of these spots and pull tightly.”

“Here? Here?”

As Ji-heon followed Ye-na’s wiggling toes, he extended his fingers.

Seeing the two of them acting serious while merely playing a string game, as if conducting a scientific experiment, made Jeong-o and Kook-soon struggle to contain their laughter.

Ji-heon obediently followed Ye-na's instructions, placing the yarn on his thumb and index finger. The yarn, firmly caught on the child's small fingers, transferred to Ji-heon's hand.

As Ye-na pulled her hand away, she said, "Now! Pull tight!"

Under Ye-na's thorough guidance, Ji-heon firmly pulled the yarn. However, he misjudged his strength, causing the yarn to unravel. Ye-na's face fell, and Ji-heon felt embarrassed.

"Ahhh! It's ruined! It's all because of you, Uncle!"

"Ye-na, you need to call me Dad."

Jeong-o immediately corrected him.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

The precious night slipped by like turning a page, and the next morning arrived.

Ji-heon, dressed neatly in a suit, headed to the headquarters. He had business to discuss with his father.

The head of the Seoyeon Group, Chairman Jeong Jae-gwang.

A thorough man who worked 380 days a year, operating as if a day had 25 hours.

"Father, I'm here."

"Yeah."

"It's Sunday, yet you're here."

“I have a lot to report.”

Except for a brief moment during the executive meeting, it had been almost two months since I personally met my father, but our conversation was devoid of warmth and felt stiff.

“When you sit in this position, you will understand how I feel. It’s a place where I’m responsible for the livelihoods of tens of thousands. Not just the employees, but their families become our family. So I have to live my life diligently.”

In his talk about work and the advice that followed, his life philosophy was evident.

He was perfect when it came to work, but he was never a family man. Perhaps his thorough sense of responsibility made my mother feel even lonelier.

My mother might have become more attached to me due to the love she didn’t receive from my father.

An indifferent father. A father who was emotionally distant.

I found it hard to judge whether I could confide in him about everything.

Would he be a shield to protect me from all the external pressures, or would he side with my mother and pressure me as well?

I feared that the conflict would grow, but I would confront it nonetheless.

“I have something to say.”

“Right. That’s why you came. Go ahead and tell me.”

Gathering courage, Jiheon began.

“Father, don’t you want to see your granddaughter?”

At that sudden question, Jaekwang raised an eyebrow.

“Have you finally made up your mind?”

With a sigh that suggested it was a boring topic, Jaekwang responded easily.

“Yeah. Get married. A long time ago, I thought your brother would get married first, and I would send you off after him, but that’s no longer the case. If you’ve made up your mind, do it right away. Have as many granddaughters or grandsons as you can.”

“No, that’s not it.”

“……”

“The truth is, I already have a child. She’s seven years old.”

Jaekwang, who had been waving his hands as if to dismiss the matter, suddenly turned to look at Jiheon.

In the silence, Jaekwang stared at him intently, inviting him to sit on the sofa across from him.

“Sit down.”

An illegitimate child. His son had an illegitimate child.

It was somewhat fortunate that he was still unmarried, but the fact that the child was already seven years old posed a significant problem.

“What’s the child’s name?”

“Her name is Lee Ye-na.”

“Is she from the Lee family?”

“I didn’t know.”

“……”

“I lost all my memories, so I lost everything.”

Taking a deep breath as if preparing himself, Jaekwang said,

“Tell me. Don’t leave anything out.”

Jiheon shared everything that had happened with Jaekwang: how he met Jeong-o, how they broke up, his car accident and amnesia, the life Jeong-o had to lead, and how they ended up meeting again.

While listening to Jiheon’s story, Jaekwang slowly rubbed his sweaty hands together.

He never expected his son to be the protagonist of such a story. And then,

“Granddaughter. A granddaughter, huh…”

Shock, excitement, curiosity, and sorrow—various emotions he had forgotten while focusing on work seemed to fight for dominance within him.

In that excited heart, his son added fuel to the fire.

“Father, daughters are great. They rule the world. Moreover…”

“……”

“She’s incredibly smart.”

Smart?

“And she’s incredibly beautiful.”

Beautiful? Incredibly?

“She’s unbelievably cute.”

Cute, even?

“She has a cuteness that saves the world.”

Determined to persuade his father, Jiheon pulled out a photo from his inner pocket—a photo that would serve as the final touch.

It was a picture received from Jeong-o, taken on Ye-na’s seventh birthday morning, showcasing her adorable appearance.

Jaekwang picked up the photo with trembling hands.

A precious girl, the first female heir of the Jeong family in three generations.

His feelings upon first seeing this precious granddaughter in the photo were…

It’s unbelievable.

Jaekwang unconsciously placed his hand over his heart. It hurt.

Indeed, she had a cuteness that could save the world.

Ch82 - Don’t Interrupt

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“There’s a salmon spot on her forehead. Just like I used to have when I was a child.”

A salmon spot on her forehead?

“She’s seven years old and can already play Go.”

She can play Go already?

Jiheon’s words excited Jaekwang. He stared at the photo for a long time, examining it closely, as if he were counting the eyelashes on the child’s eyes.

The child was incredibly cute, to the point where his heart ached. She was indeed very cute, but…

“Is this adorable child really Jiheon’s daughter?”

Jaekwang’s gaze shifted back and forth between the child in the photo and Jiheon. He scrutinized the similarities between the two, becoming more contemplative.

“Have I ever seen such a cute face before?”

Though they were related by blood, they looked different—one was exceptionally cute, while the other was not cute at all, leaving him unsure of his judgment.

“I wonder if she takes after her mother…”

Jaekwang barely managed to put the photo down and cleared his throat. He shouldn’t rush to conclusions. As a father, he needed to show rationality first.

“Are you sure she’s your child? That’s definite?”

“Yes, it’s true. I have some memories, albeit very few.”

“But those memories might not be real. Seven years have passed, after all.”

“……”

“First, we need to do a paternity test.”

“Well, there’s a bit of a problem.”

“……”

“The child doesn’t like me yet.”

“Why?”

“She’s lived without a father for seven years.”

After staring blankly for a while, Jaekwang nodded as if he understood Jiheon’s feelings.

“……That makes sense. It would be hard for her to accept a father who suddenly appeared after seven years.”

But he emphasized the importance of principles with authority.

“Still, you have to do what needs to be done.”

“Yes. I’ll do it soon. But I think I need to get somewhat close to her first, which is why I’m telling you about it beforehand.”

Earlier, Jiheon had confessed everything to Jaekwang, but he refrained from discussing matters related to Yeongmi as much as possible. He only

mentioned that the reason he and Jeong-o had separated was due to the car accident. After that, they lost contact and broke up.

Even if Jiheon currently harbored resentment toward his mother, he couldn’t afford to give the impression of disparaging her in front of his father.

Speaking about unverifiable facts could backfire. It could even lead Jaekwang to develop a negative sentiment about his story.

He needed to stick to the facts, avoiding sensitive topics while not revealing his current feelings about his mother.

“Actually, my mother secretly had a paternity test done.”

“Then your mother knew about it?”

“Yes. I couldn’t ask how much she knew, but it seems she conducted an investigation on her own. However, the results she received indicated that there’s no likelihood of a biological relationship.”

“What does that even mean?”

“My mother secretly tested the child’s hair, but it seems the hair sample got switched somewhere along the way. The chauffeur, Choi, took the specimen to the genetic research institute on my mother’s behalf, and he apparently ran into Chae Eun-yeop on the way.”

“Isn’t Chae Eun-yeop your friend?”

“He’s also Chae Eun-bi’s older brother. He’s the one who wants to marry me to Chae Eun-bi.”

Though it was a surprising revelation and hard to fully believe, there was a degree of logic to it. Jaekwang stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“If it turns out the child is my biological granddaughter, then he’d be further from his dream of marrying Chae Eun-bi, so he might have set this up.”

“Does that mean you and Chae Eun-bi haven’t really moved on yet?”

“I moved on a long time ago. It’s just that Chae Eun-bi and Chae Eun-yeop haven’t accepted it.”

“……”

“It seems my mother hasn’t accepted it either.”

Jiheon cautiously brought up his mother again.

“My mother told me not to associate with the child. She said we should do the paternity test first, and if it’s confirmed, then we can talk again.”

“Your mother isn’t wrong. The paternity test needs to come first.”

“I need to get close to the child in order to do the paternity test, Father.”

“……”

“Of course, we could do the test using the child’s hair first, but there could be other contamination variables like Chae Eun-yeop, so I want to be as careful as possible. I plan to take her in for a blood test directly.”

At Jiheon’s calm insistence, Jaekwang frowned, lost in thought.

After a moment, Jaekwang spoke.

“Alright. Do it that way. But don’t let it take too long.”

“I’ll do it quickly.”

With his father’s approval, a quiet smile appeared on Jiheon’s lips. Just the fact that his father acknowledged the mistake of the paternity test conducted unilaterally by his mother was a positive outcome.

“The child’s mother is a copywriter, right?”

“Yes.”

“If she really is your daughter… what a strange fate.”

“It’s destiny.”

Don’t Disturb Me

“I have a salmon spot on my forehead, just like when I was little.”

A salmon spot on your forehead?

“A seven-year-old already knows how to play Go.”

He plays Go too?

Jaekwang felt a surge of excitement at Jiheon’s words. He stared at the photo for a long time, examining it as if he could count the number of eyelashes on the child’s eyes.

The child was unbearably cute. So cute, in fact…

‘Is this cute child really Jiheon’s daughter?’

Jaekwang’s gaze shifted back and forth between the child in the photo and Jiheon’s face. He compared the two closely, getting more absorbed in thought.

Had he ever seen the child’s adorable face before?

It could look similar since they shared blood, but one was extremely cute while the other wasn’t cute at all, making it hard for him to decide.

‘Does she take after her mother…?’

Jaekwang finally put the photo down and cleared his throat. He had to be rational as a father.

“Is she really your child? Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure. I have very vague memories, but they’re definitely there.”

“But those memories might not be real. It’s been seven years.”

“…”

“First, we should do a paternity test.”

“Well, there’s a slight problem with that.”

“…”

“The child doesn’t like me yet.”

“Why not?”

“She’s been without a dad for seven years.”

After a long silence, Jaekwang nodded as if he understood Jiheon’s feelings.

“…I see. It wouldn’t be easy for a child to accept a father who suddenly shows up after seven years.”

But he insisted firmly on the principle.

“Still, we need to do it.”

“Yes. I’ll do it soon. But I think I need to get to know her a bit first. That’s why I’m telling you about this.”

Earlier, Jiheon had told Jaekwang everything honestly, but he avoided discussing anything related to Youngmi as much as possible. He had said that the reason he and Jeongno broke up was due to a car accident, after which he lost contact.

Even if Jiheon deeply resented his mother now, he couldn’t give the impression that he was slandering her at that moment.

Talking about facts that couldn’t be proven could backfire. It might even cause his father to have a negative reaction to his story.

He had to stick to the facts without touching on sensitive issues and without revealing how he currently felt about his mother.

“Actually, my mother secretly had a paternity test done.”

“Then your mother knew about this?”

“Yes. I didn’t ask her how much she knew, but it seems she did some investigation on her own. However, the result she received said there was no possibility of paternity.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“My mother secretly tested the child’s hair, but it seems like the hair got switched somewhere along the way. The driver, Choi, took the sample to the genetic research institute as a favor for my mother and happened to run into Chae Eun-yeob.”

“Isn’t Chae Eun-yeob your friend?”

“Yes, he’s also Chae Eun-bi’s brother. He’s the one who wants to marry me off to Chae Eun-bi.”

While it was a surprising fact and hard to believe, it made sense. Jaekwang stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“If it’s revealed that the child is my biological child, he might think that marrying Chae Eun-bi and me is further away, so he might have plotted this.”

“Does that mean you and Chae Eun-bi haven’t finished things yet?”

“I ended it a long time ago. It’s just that Chae Eun-bi and Chae Eun-yeob haven’t accepted it.”

“…”

“It seems like my mother hasn’t accepted it either.”

Jiheon cautiously brought up his mother again.

“My mother told me not to get involved with the child. She said to do the paternity test first and then talk about it once it’s confirmed.”

“Your mother isn’t wrong. We need to confirm paternity first.”

“I think I need to get close to the child before we can even do the paternity test, Father.”

“…”

“Of course, we could do the paternity test with the child’s hair first, but there could be contamination factors like Chae Eun-yeob, so I’m trying to be cautious. I plan to take her in for a blood test directly.”

Hearing Jiheon’s calm reasoning, Jaekwang frowned as he thought deeply.

After a moment, Jaekwang said, “Okay. Do that. But don’t take too long.”

“I’ll hurry.”

Once Jaekwang gave his permission, a quiet smile appeared on Jiheon’s face. Just the fact that his father acknowledged that the paternity test his mother had unilaterally conducted was wrong felt like a significant achievement.

“Is the child’s mother a copywriter?”

“Yes.”

“If the child really is your daughter… that’s quite a coincidence.”

“It’s fate.”

As he answered “fate,” Jiheon suddenly thought of Jeongno and paused.

“I’m going to apply to an advertising agency. I want to be a copywriter. What about you, oppa? What’s your dream?”

The sound of waves crashing. The refreshing smell of the sea. And the sparkling smile of the girl who asked sweetly, fitting perfectly with the ocean.

Lee Jeongno with long hair.

For the first time, it wasn’t a thought but an image that popped into his mind.

Two months ago, when Jiheon was transferred to Max Planning as the director, it was a decision made of his own volition, but in truth, there was no reason behind it.

He felt an inexplicable force pulling him toward an advertising agency, wanting to go there without thinking it through. Though Chae Eun-yeob’s younger sister, Chae Eun-bi, bothered him, his desire was so strong that it overshadowed even that.

Was it a desire to meet Jeongno? Somewhere in his subconscious, did he have feelings of longing for Lee Jeongno?

“It is fate.”

Jiheon repeated his assertion more firmly, almost like a spell.

Jaekwang gazed thoughtfully at his son, who was smiling gently. His son looked a little cute.

‘Do we look alike…?’

Jaekwang had been too busy with work to take care of his family when the child was growing up. He began to think that the reason he hadn’t seen the child’s cute face might not be that she wasn’t cute but because he hadn’t been around long enough.

“I’ll be going now. I’ll come back to tell you more later.”

As Jiheon got up to pick up the photo of Yena on the table, Jaekwang quickly and sternly said, “Leave the photo.”

…….

Max Planning Conference Room.

Jeongno was staring blankly at the laptop screen.

Jiheon hadn’t come to her house this morning. He said he had work since Sunday morning. After spending several days starting and ending her days with him, she felt a little empty today.

The moment she thought about feeling empty, her mind snapped back to reality. No, when did I become so dependent on Jung Jiheon? If he becomes family, I’d welcome that, but I know I shouldn’t rely on him completely.

He has complicated issues, and just solving them would be burdensome for him.

Moreover, there was no guarantee that what happened seven years ago wouldn’t happen again. He could lose his memory again. Ultimately, to withstand any adversity without being hurt, she had to become stronger on her own without relying on Jung Jiheon.

“Assistant Lee, are you hungry? Should we order something to eat?”

Deputy Manager Park Young-kwang walked in as he passed by the conference room.

The rookie copywriter from the adjacent team had gone down to the countryside for his grandfather’s funeral, and Chae Eun-bi was out of touch. Somehow, Jeongno ended up as the sole representative of the copywriters working on the production plan again.

However, compared to the designers in the same team, her struggles seemed trivial. Besides, Team Leader Seong Mi-ran and Deputy Manager Park Young-kwang occasionally checked in, so she didn’t feel too drained. Still, she was a bit hungry.

“Deputy Manager, don’t you want to eat tteokbokki?”

“Sounds good. How about we get tteokbokki from Bori Bunsik? Assistant Lee likes that place.”

“Unfortunately, they don’t deliver there.”

“Then I’ll go and get it.”

“No, it’s hot outside…”

“It’s fine. Assistant Lee has been shouldering all the work; we should at least make sure you have a good meal. Let’s eat together in the conference room later.”

“Yes, thank you.”

After the kind Deputy Manager Park Young-kwang left, the moment Jeongno was once again alone, she heard a knock. Jiheon appeared at the already open door.

Seeing Jiheon made her smile widely, despite her earlier resolution not to depend on him. But soon, she firmly closed her mouth, ready to maintain her resolve.

“Director, you’re out.”

“Yes, I’m out.”

Jiheon skillfully responded to Jeongno’s earnest greeting.

In a conference room with just the two of them, it felt like a play. However, seeing him trying to keep the promise made yesterday to be careful made Jeongno feel proud. It was never bad to be cautious.

After the door closed, Jeongno continued nonchalantly.

“You said you had work this morning. Did you finish it well?”

“I just met with my father.”

“Really? What did he say?”

But Jeongno was the first to get excited at Jiheon’s answer. Realizing she had made a mistake, she quickly bit her lip.

Jiheon smiled brightly at her, as if he had been waiting for this moment, reaching out to her. Just as her hair was gently tucked behind her ear, he leaned in, softly kissing her lips.

Her hand, which had been resting on her lap, shot up in surprise. During that less than ten seconds when their lips were connected, her heart felt like it was racing a hundred times.

As Jiheon wiped his shining lips with his thumb, he looked at her with a satisfied smile.

Wow, this opportunist.

I can’t make mistakes in front of him. If I do, he’ll confidently seize that opportunity and strike.

His eagerness to take advantage of every moment made her feel slightly annoyed, and she glared at him before asking again.

“What did your father say?”

“He wants to do the paternity test quickly.”

“…”

“He said if Yena is really my daughter, it would be amazing how fate works. He didn’t seem to have any resentment.”

“None at all?”

“He didn’t show it much, but he seemed genuinely pleased. He’s different from my mother. I think he’ll like Yena a lot. That’s the feeling I got.”

“I’m relieved to hear that.”

At Jiheon’s reply, Jeongno let out a sigh of relief. Though she had resolved not to depend on him, she felt a strange amazement at how he had confidently resolved the issue she was worried about, igniting a desire to lean on him a bit more.

“And there’s one more thing I remember.”

Jiheon interrupted her moment of contemplation.

“I’m not sure if this is a real memory, but I recalled something. It was like a beach, I could hear the sound of waves, and you told me that you wanted to become a copywriter there.”

Jeongno’s expression brightened as she listened to Jiheon’s story.

“Yes! That’s right! I told you about my dream of entering an advertising agency and wanting to be a copywriter at Melbourne Beach. I even asked you what your dream was, but you don’t remember that?”

Finally, the fact that they shared a memory filled Jeongno with joy. She felt overwhelmed with emotion.

“You said you didn’t really have a dream. You were a young man without a dream back then. But when we met again in Korea, you said you wanted to settle down with a job.”

Jiheon’s heart raced at her bright expression. Unconsciously, his hand reached out to her again.

Outside the conference room.

Deputy Manager Park Young-kwang had returned, having asked the team members about lunch options and was about to enter the conference room when he froze, staring at the glass door.

The atmosphere between Lee Jeongno and Jiheon was peculiar. Although Jeongno had her back to the door and her face was hidden, Jiheon’s profile, turned towards Jeongno, was clearly visible.

The director, who had always appeared cold as if he had ice water running through his veins, was now looking at Jeongno with an expression so warm it felt like honey was dripping from his gaze.

It was hard to believe, even having witnessed it with his own eyes.

In that moment of disbelief, he made eye contact with Jiheon through the glass. Jiheon clearly recognized that Young-kwang was standing outside, yet he didn’t withdraw his hand reaching toward Jeongno.

“Don’t disturb me.”

Somehow, he felt as if those words echoed in his gaze. Young-kwang felt his knees go weak.

Ch83 - Dad Runs

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The air in the conference room was warm and peaceful, unlike outside.

Jiheon's large hand felt comforting and reassuring, making Jeongoo want to be petted for a long time, but she quickly kept her distance. It would be awkward if someone came in suddenly.

Jiheon, understanding Jeongoo's feelings, didn't insist on getting closer. But he couldn't leave the room; he wanted to talk to her for a long time.

"Is it true that I was a good cook seven years ago?"

"Yes! Very much so! Your kitchen in my one-room apartment was all yours. You were in charge of cooking."

Once Jiheon opened the topic, Jeongoo answered enthusiastically but then tilted her head and asked, "So you haven't cooked at all for seven years?"

"Yes. I didn't even realize it."

Though she had never really believed the exaggerations about his hobby cooking, his blunt answer sounded so pitiful.

She wanted to give him hope. There must be a memory hidden somewhere in his unconscious that he hadn't yet uncovered.

"Do you want to see this?"

Jeongoo pulled out her phone and opened her photo album. She had found a picture while organizing photos of Yeona and saved it on her phone.

Jiheon moved closer, focusing on the screen of Jeongoo's phone. It was a photo of a small, cozy-looking room. The room felt somehow familiar, almost identical to the last room in the apartment he had decorated.

"This is my old room. The one you used to visit often."

Ah…

Jiheon sighed softly.

Fragments of distant memories returned to their original places, stirring his head and heart.

So that's why he felt so at ease when he entered that room? Because it was Jeongoo's home?

"You used to say you liked my one-room apartment more than your own. Now I understand why…"

Before Jiheon could voice his question, Jeongoo started to say something but quickly fell silent. Jiheon furrowed his brows and asked, "What was that?"

"There's a reason."

"What is it? Why did you stop talking?"

"Just remember it."

"No, you tell me."

"Try to remember. Then it'll come back to you."

Jeongoo, aren't you treating me too harshly?

Feeling like he wanted to be treated gently, Jiheon furrowed his brow and closed his eyes. He raised a hand to rub his forehead.

"Ah, my head suddenly hurts… It feels like it's going to break."

“Are you hurt?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it really painful?”

“Yes.”

“If you’re in my one-room, you can see everything I’m doing, that’s why you liked my one-room.”

Jiheon’s groaning caused Jeongoo to quickly spill the truth.

It was painful for her just to watch him, but Jiheon soon straightened up, raising his lips into a smile.

“Is that so? That’s so you, Jeong Jiheon.”

“What? Were you lying just now?”

“You should have figured that out.”

“Wow, Jeong Jiheon, really!”

Jeongoo’s voice rose in indignation, and Jiheon quickly placed his finger to his lips, saying “Shh.” Jeongoo had no choice but to suppress her irritation.

Without the luxury of catching her breath, she listened to Jiheon’s lament.

“Why did I forget the most important thing?”

“…”

“Even if I forget everything else, I shouldn’t have forgotten that.”

“Our time together wasn’t that long.”

His sunken gaze seeped into Jeongoo’s eyes. The man who had just annoyed her now made her heart ache.

“But gradually it’ll come back. I believe that.”

In the end, she found herself comforting him.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Jiheon left the conference room and headed to the elevator. He caught a glimpse of Team Leader Park Young-gwang moving toward the elevator in the hallway.

“Oh… Director.”

Young-gwang stiffened when he spotted Jiheon, then nodded slightly. It felt as if he were stepping on a bed of thorns—no, a bed of needles. Just being alone with him was difficult and awkward, but having witnessed something he shouldn’t have made it even harder.

Jiheon was the first to break the silence, speaking to Young-gwang, who could barely manage to swallow his dry throat.

“The filming on Tuesday will go ahead as planned, right?”

“Yes. As long as there are no further issues, it should be perfectly fine.”

“Thanks to Team 2’s hard work, we can keep the schedule. I’m looking forward to the filming.”

“Yes. We’ll do our best.”

“I respect you a lot, Team Leader.”

Young-gwang, who couldn’t look Jiheon in the eye, slowly raised his head. He thought it was odd to hear such an unexpected compliment while discussing filming.

Jiheon’s expression was stiff, as if he were someone who had just confessed admiration.

Cold sweat trickled down Young-gwang’s forehead.

“Why… why do you respect me?”

“Because you get along well with your colleagues and always achieve great results. I look forward to working with you in the future.”

Jiheon’s gaze was sharp, as if the scene he had just witnessed with his own eyes was a lie.

This is… a message to not even smile at my colleagues and just focus on work, isn’t it?

A pressure disguised as respect. The quick-witted Young-gwang immediately grasped Jiheon’s intention.

“Yes. I will work hard.”

Young-gwang answered, hardly able to breathe.

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After working overtime and returning home, Jiheon connected the USB that Jeongoo had handed back to him to his PC. This time, it seemed that all the photos of Yeona were properly saved.

He was so immersed in viewing each photo as if he were reading that it felt impossible to finish them all in one night. Yet, Jiheon kept telling himself just one more, just one more, and ultimately ended up looking through all of them.

And then morning came.

“Gah!”

Jiheon had overslept for the first time in a long while. Well, he couldn’t even say he had slept.

After it passed 5 AM, he figured he might ruin his Monday and closed his eyes for a bit. He thought he’d struggle to wake up if he lay down in bed, so he dozed off while leaning back in a chair, only to wake up at 7:55 AM.

Jiheon jumped up in a panic, quickly washed up, got dressed, and rushed out the door. He was so absorbed in the photos of Yeona that he was at risk of missing the real Yeona.

Yeona's bus was scheduled to depart at 8:20 AM. He had to get to Jeongoo's house in 20 minutes. He had promised the child he would come every day, and he had to keep that promise, even if the child might dislike him or ignore him.

He finally made it to the area near Jeongoo's house without being stuck in traffic, but as he got closer, the road became completely blocked. With just three minutes left, Jiheon, feeling anxious, parked in an alley and hurriedly got out of the car.

In the distance, he spotted the kindergarten bus where Yeona always boarded. And, far away, he saw two beautiful, cute, and lovely figures, Jeongoo and Yeona…

Heh-heh-heh.

"Yeona, I'm coming!"

He felt like he had never run with such urgency before. The wind hitting him felt sharp, stabbing him like needles in his throat.

Still, Dad runs!

Haaah!

Finally, he made it just in time.

Huff, huff, huff.

He was so out of breath he felt like he might throw up, his head spinning, as if the colors of the entire world had faded. Yet, there was one thing that stood out clearly: his little princess.

"Yeona, hello."

His breath came out sounding monstrous due to his labored panting. Yeona climbed onto the bus with a frown, not even responding.

Ah, that cute little thing is my daughter.

Jiheon waved his hand vigorously until Yeona settled into her seat on the bus, just like sending off a train bound for enlistment. She glanced at him briefly, then turned her head away in a haughty manner.

“Why did you run here like that?”

After the bus departed, Jeongoo rubbed Jiheon’s back, looking sorry for him as he was ignored.

“There was nothing I could do; the road was blocked.”

Jiheon replied in a hoarse voice, still catching his breath.

“I fell asleep late after looking at Yeona’s pictures yesterday.”

“Oh no! I can’t believe it. Our Yeona is capturing her dad.”

But it was okay. He had greeted her. He had kept his promise.

“Yeona, even if I become a monster from running so hard and feel like I’m falling apart, I will come to see you every day.”

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After spending a fairly good day with her friends at kindergarten and boarding the return bus, Yeona recalled Jiheon from that morning.

What was it about just seeing his face for a moment that made him run toward her so desperately? That man who had rushed over from afar.

Somehow, she felt like she shouldn’t turn away from him, so she climbed onto the bus slowly. No one knew, but she did.

The uncle who had run over while panting heavily had made such a monstrous sound that Yeona immediately turned her head away.

As usual, she didn’t greet him. If she didn’t say hello today, she wouldn’t talk to him tomorrow either. She devised a resolute plan.

Though her heart was tough, she couldn’t help but laugh the whole way to the kindergarten on the bus.

In the fairy tales that her mom read to her, there were occasionally monsters, but her mom could only describe pretty monsters. She felt that this uncle might be able to play the part of a fierce monster. She had found a use for the uncle.

Thinking of how she could use him made her feel a bit guilty for not greeting him. But it was just a fleeting sense of guilt, and she knew that when tomorrow came, she wouldn’t be able to move her lips again.

“Yeona, we’ve arrived. It’s time to get off.”

Before she knew it, they had reached the academy, and the bus came to a stop. The teacher got off the bus with Yeona. Since the academy teacher hadn’t come out to greet them yet, Yeona and the teacher had to wait on the street.

“It seems the teacher is running a little late today. I’ll call the academy.”

While the kindergarten teacher was on the phone, Yeona stood there absentmindedly. The area in front of the academy was a taxi stand, so there were times when people stood in the spot where the teacher was waiting.

Today was one of those days. Yeona noticed a well-dressed elderly gentleman in a suit standing by the road, glancing at her.

Everyone standing here had the same pose—raising their hands to signal for a taxi.

Was this grandfather waiting for a car other than a taxi? It seemed a bit odd that he was standing still without trying to catch a passing taxi.

‘This child…’

Jaegwang stole a glance at the girl.

It was a cool day, having barely escaped the influence of the typhoon, but the wind blew briskly. The wind tousled the girl’s bangs, revealing her round forehead. The pink salmon hair firmly anchored on her forehead gave him a peculiar heartwarming feeling.

The impulse to say something to her, to hold her hand, tormented his lips and fingertips, but Jaegwang managed to overcome it. Meanwhile, the driver and secretary, who had been watching the cars from afar, waved their arms energetically.

“Chairman, the schedule is tight. You must leave now. You can’t just stand there.”

If he delayed any longer, the secretary would probably rush over and shout “Chairman!” right in front of him. Slowly, Jaegwang began to move his feet. A sense of regret lingered at his toes. Yeona also stared for a long time at the direction the grandfather was leaving.

“Yeona!”

From the opposite side, Dobin came running. Only then did Yeona turn her head. Jinseo and the academy teacher also rushed over at the same time.

After the kindergarten teacher had left, the first to come running was Dobin, who greeted her warmly.

“Yeona, were you waiting for me?”

“Yes. I was waiting.”

Although it wasn’t true, Yeona answered that way. As she had guessed, Dobin’s face broke into a wide grin. She realized that sometimes, people could tell a lie just to make someone feel better. Somehow, she thought of the uncle again.

The uncle who comes to her house every morning. The uncle whose truthfulness she couldn’t discern.

Would the uncle come again tomorrow morning?

If he didn’t come, she felt like she would be curious about him. That thought lingered in her mind.

Ch84 - Please Get a Grip!

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The new package design concept for Dawon Liquor barely passed. Jiheon visited the Dawon Liquor headquarters with the designer to finalize everything. If the sample work went as planned tonight, it needed to be checked immediately and sent to the filming site tomorrow.

Although the designer was the busiest, Jeongoh was also running around and forgot that the teaser ad for Mi&Talk had gone on air. It wasn't until late in the afternoon that Jeongoh logged onto the video site to check people's reactions.

"It's a heartwarming ad after a long time. The warm copy touched my heart. I need to call my parents. I can't wait for the full ad…" There were quite a few positive comments.

Of course, the real test would be the response to the full ad later, but it seemed they had successfully raised people's expectations for now.

There's nothing more rewarding than when an ad resonates and boosts product sales, but Jeongoh also felt a sense of pride as a copywriter during moments like this—when a line of copy she wrote touched someone's heart.

Wanting to show the new ad to Guksoon, she sent a text message and continued with her work. On her way back after discussing the ad filming issues with the AE, she ran into Seungkyu in the hallway. Seungkyu greeted her first with a bright smile.

"Hello, Assistant Manager."

"Hi. Nice to see you, Deputy General Manager."

As Jeongoh replied with a smile, Seungkyu moved closer and lowered his voice.

“I heard about Jiheon from him.”

“Yes, I heard you mentioned it to him as well.”

“It’s quite an interesting connection, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. I was surprised to learn that Dobin’s father is the Deputy General Manager.”

“Do you have a moment to chat?”

As Jeongoh responded warmly, Seungkyu pointed to an empty meeting room nearby. Inside the meeting room, Seungkyu showed Jeongoh a video on his phone.

When Jeongoh received Seungkyu’s phone, her eyes widened.

It was a video of Jiheon and his friends drinking together. Jiheon’s youthful face was playing on the screen.

“This is…”

“It’s Jiheon from seven years ago. This was probably around June.”

“…”

“You can’t see this version of him anymore since the accident.”

In a lively bar atmosphere, Jiheon was smiling with a rosy face. Even when his friends asked what good thing had happened, he simply drank and smiled, not saying a word.

Jeongoh’s eyes became moist at the sight of his kind-looking eyes.

June seven years ago. It seemed to be just after Jeongoh and Jiheon had started dating.

“He looks so innocent, doesn’t he? He wasn’t always like this. He was diligent and earnest in the military, but he was cold in his reactions, so not many people got close to him. It seems he started showing a more human side after his trip to Australia.”

Seungkyu shared stories from that time.

“That friend, who was gradually changing, became cold again after the traffic accident seven years ago. It’s like he lost the heart in his chest.”

“…”

“I’ve always wondered what could have been lost in my friend’s life to cause such a change. It turns out it was you, Assistant Manager Lee Jeongoh.”

Jeongoh felt a pang in her heart at Seungkyu’s words. She was grateful that Jiheon had a friend like Seungkyu by his side.

On the other hand, it was also sad. It seemed that Jiheon didn’t realize back then just how good a friend Seungkyu was. That’s why he probably didn’t open up to him. She genuinely appreciated Seungkyu for maintaining a good relationship with Jiheon, despite his coldness and indifference.

“Thank you for showing me this and sharing those stories.”

Jeongoh expressed her gratitude sincerely.

***

Guksoon Baekban.

Yeona sat at the dining table, staring only at the entrance. Finally, the door opened.

“Mom.”

“Princess Yeona! Did you finish eating?”

After finishing her work and leaving on time, Jeongoh approached Yeona and asked.

“No. I was waiting to eat with Mom.”

“Okay. Let’s eat.”

After greeting Guksoon, who was working alone in the kitchen, Jeongoh sat across from Yeona to eat. Although she left work early, it was the filming day tomorrow, and a major issue had arisen, so Jeongoh’s phone was buzzing non-stop.

Every few spoonfuls she took, her phone rang, and after finishing one call, another would come in, keeping her from eating for a long time. After being tied to her phone for about ten minutes, she finally gained some freedom.

Ten minutes had passed, but Yeona’s bowl of rice remained untouched. Yeona seemed to be less energetic than usual. If she didn’t like the side dishes, she wouldn’t say anything, and her eating pace would slow down, so Jeongoh watched her for a few minutes before gently chiding her.

“Yeona, you need to eat evenly.”

“Mom, can’t I stop eating?”

“No, just eat five more spoonfuls.”

“I can’t eat anymore.”

“Alright. You can stop. But there will be no snacks.”

When she said she wouldn’t let her have snacks, Yeona sulked and got up from the table. Only then did Jeongoh ask her.

“Yeona, you don’t seem to be in a good mood. Is something wrong?”

“Mom.”

Encouraged by Jeongoh’s attention, Yeona spoke up.

“Can you get me a cellphone?”

“…What?”

“Mom has one, and Grandma has one, but I don’t have one.”

“Our Yeona is still only seven years old…”

“Uncle can call Mom anytime he wants, but I can’t even call her when I miss her.”

While a flustered Jeongoh searched for a response, Yeona sharply retorted.

Did she take it for granted that she had been able to talk to Jiheon up until now?

“Yeona, I was on a work call just now…”

“Buy it for me! A cellphone!”

Ugh.

Before Jeongoh could explain further, Yeona suddenly burst into tears. A customer entering the restaurant paused in surprise at Yeona’s cries.

Jeongoh comforted Yeona while she ate dinner and considered getting her a children’s cellphone. It seemed okay to have one that only allowed calls and text messages without any other functions.

The phone also had a tracking feature, which reassured Jeongoh in case of any unfortunate incidents.

Jeongoh went to a cellphone store with Yeona and opened an account for her. The adorable little phone, about the size of a credit card, fit perfectly in the child’s hand.

What a cute little kid holding something so cute.

The child, as if she had never cried, looked at her new cellphone with a bright face. Although it had no features other than calling and texting, the fact that she now had her own phone and a number made her genuinely happy.

***

Jeongoh sternly advised Yeona.

“Yeona, this isn’t a phone you got because you cried. I’m buying it so you can call me if a suspicious person shows up. Got it?”

“Okay!”

“Keep that in mind. I won’t give in to crying or throwing a tantrum. Understand?”

“Okay!”

Despite Yeona’s cheerful responses, Jeongoh felt a weight on her heart.

“Ugh, I’m worried. If you get a cellphone, Dobin will want one too.”

***

After returning from an external meeting, the day had flown by, and evening soon arrived. It was a busy Monday with lots of work to handle, so Jiheon couldn’t leave the office until late.

Having barely slept due to looking at pictures of the kids, Jiheon’s eyes grew increasingly tired. He momentarily set aside his work, leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes.

Knock, knock.

Without a moment of respite, a knock came from outside the door.

“Yes.”

Jiheon straightened up in his seat and replied. The door opened.

He thought it was probably one of the remaining staff coming to report something, but it was Eunyeob. Jiheon’s expression turned cold.

In the morning, Jiheon had officially notified Eunyeob that he would terminate the advisory contract with his law firm. Since it was a pretty large law firm, he thought they could easily let go of Max Planning, but Eunyeob’s personal visit surprised him a bit.

As soon as Eunyeob entered the office, he looked at Jiheon’s face with a surprised expression and asked, “Jiheon, are you okay? You don’t look well.”

“It’s not something you need to worry about.”

Jiheon coldly replied to Eunyeob, who was feigning concern.

“Did you come here about the contract? If so, you’re wasting your trip.”

Jiheon debated whether to stand up or not but eventually rose from his chair and walked to the door.

“There’s no chance I’ll reverse my decision. I want this handled according to the procedure, and please return your access card before you leave.”

Jiheon firmly grasped the doorknob but paused for a moment.

“By the way, can you get in touch with your sister?”

Since they wouldn’t likely meet again, he thought he should pass on some information while Eunyeob was there.

“She hasn’t shown up for work in a while, and she hasn’t handed over her responsibilities properly. So that team is currently in a very difficult situation. If you see her, please tell her that if she wants to quit, she should do it properly.”

“Haah. Jiheon, think about it. Why do you think my sister is acting like this right now?”

Eunyeob replied with a sigh, as if exasperated, and continued.

“Isn’t it absurd for her? After living for four years only looking at you, she’s now in a situation where even if she gets married, people will say it’s too late, while her boyfriend is shamelessly seeing two people at once. The issue isn’t about showing up for work. Do you think my sister wants to live like this?”

“You know very well that there’s nothing between Cha Eunbi and me, right? In fact, I probably told you that Eunbi made up some rumors that put me in a tough spot.”

“Those aren’t rumors. You and Eunbi were in a relationship by mutual agreement.”

Eunyeob’s provocative words made Jiheon’s eyebrows twitch.

“I thought you just took your word for it and assumed my sister was in the wrong, but after listening to her properly, I found it utterly ridiculous.”

“…”

“You exploited my sister as your girlfriend for four years. That’s exploitation, Jiheon.”

Before visiting the office, Eunyeob had prepared a scenario considering various situations. To act brazenly and confidently was one of his specialties.

You arrogant little brat. You will never be able to escape us, Jeong Jiheon.

Seeing Jiheon’s face flicker with frustration as he couldn’t act against him made Eunyeob feel amused. The evident signs of fatigue on Jiheon’s face suggested that he had probably had a rough night.

“And Mrs. Jang said that Lee Jeongoh claims to have given birth to your child.”

“…”

“Jiheon, do you really think you know that woman well? Do you honestly believe that child is yours? How can you be so sure?”

Despite Jiheon’s sarcastic demeanor, Eunyeob continued.

“Seven years ago, how close were we? You’re not someone who would like someone like Lee Jeongoh. I don’t know what kind of memories she forced upon you, but you’re being used.”

Eunyeob pleaded with a face full of concern for his friend.

“Your memories are mistaken, Jiheon. Please get a grip!”

Doubt your memories.

Don’t trust your judgment.

Don’t trust yourself, Jeong Jiheon.

Ch85 - Lies

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Heh.

Jiheon, who had been glaring sharply at Eunyeob, suddenly burst into a faint smile. Then he said,

“You crazy bastard.”

Eunyeob was taken aback.

“…What?”

“Nothing, I just thought of something and said it out loud.”

“…”

“It’s late, so hurry up and go. Return your access card properly.”

Jiheon swung the door wide open. Eunyeob found himself in a position where he had to leave before looking ridiculous by being kicked out.

As soon as Eunyeob stepped outside, the door closed mercilessly behind him. Feeling annoyed by Jiheon’s behavior, Eunyeob’s anger flared up.

***

Drrr.

Jeongoh woke up to the loud vibrating sound of her cellphone ringing.

“Hello…?”

[Mom, wake up!]

Her daughter’s boisterous voice came through the phone, accompanied by the sound of giggles outside.

Yeona had called Jeongoh from her own cellphone after waking up first. She was in a cheerful mood.

“Yeona, it’s okay to joke around at home, but you shouldn’t do that at kindergarten, okay?”

“Mom, we don’t turn on our phones at kindergarten.”

Yeona replied cheerfully. Seeing her daughter in such a good mood brightened Jeongoh’s face. However, she felt a bit worried about Yeona’s emotional ups and downs lately, especially since she often showed signs of crying.

“Princess Yeona, look at me.”

“Okay.”

“Lately, you’ve been crying too often. Let’s try not to cry today, alright?”

Jeongoh gently patted Yeona’s shoulders as she urged her.

“Okay!”

Yeona nodded bravely, her posture straightened. Jeongoh hugged her daughter and secretly sighed.

She felt that her daughter’s frequent tears and unstable emotions were all her fault. It seemed she had given her too big a burden at an age when she should simply be loved and grow up warm, without needing to know about the adult troubles.

But there was no way to postpone this homework. Jeongoh knew well that once they got over this mountain, her daughter would be happier.

“I wish you would greet Dad in the morning too.”

Jeongoh shared her hope while trying to gauge Yeona’s reaction. It was hard to decipher the thoughts behind Yeona’s rolling eyes.

“Is that still not possible?”

After a while, Yeona asked.

“Mom, is it true?”

“What is?”

“Is that uncle really Yeona’s dad?”

***

“Of course! Absolutely!”

This was the first time Yeona had asked about Jiheon directly. Jeongoh felt a glimmer of hope. Taking this opportunity, she decided to tell Yeona the truth.

“Yeona, the truth is, Dad had a terrible car accident on his way to meet you while you were still in Mom’s belly. So, he forgot how to come to you.”

“…”

“You hate getting shots because they hurt, right? Dad had to get those painful shots for months. He was hurt so badly that he had to have surgery and take a lot of medicine.”

Yeona’s eyes sparkled with wonder as she absorbed Jeongoh’s story.

“Dad almost couldn’t get up, but he survived just to see our Yeona.”

“…”

“So let’s welcome Dad, okay?”

In the end, Yeona didn’t respond. She seemed a bit downcast. Jeongoh felt sorry for bringing Yeona back down from her high spirits after getting her a cellphone.

An hour later, as expected, Jiheon came to visit again. This time, eager to make up for yesterday’s mistake, he arrived much earlier than usual and waited outside Jeongoh’s house.

“Yeona! Hello! Did you sleep well?”

“…Hello.”

Thanks to the morning conversation, Yeona reacted, albeit with a droopy voice and lackluster greeting. But that alone gave Jiheon energy.

Today was better than yesterday. That was enough for him to feel satisfied. He could also hope that tomorrow would be even better.

As Yeona left, Jiheon waved his hand for a long time and then took Jeongoh’s hand. Jeongoh grasped it tightly before quickly letting go.

“I’m not going to work at the office today. I’m going to the factory with Gi-hun. I’ll pick up some beer and head to the shoot.”

“Song Gi-hun?”

“Yeah. Gi-hun said he’d drive over. So I hope you leave quickly without being seen.”

“You’re going with Song Gi-hun?”

“Yeah. Gi-hun has a car.”

Who dares to get in the way of me and Lee Jeong-oh? Jiheon frowned and asked with a displeased expression.

“Why is Gi-hun going?”

“Gi-hun designed the beer can packaging.”

“What about Manager Go Eun-joo?”

“Manager Go had something to do this morning.”

“…”

“Gi-hun should be here soon. You should go now.”

As Jiheon mulled over Jeongoh’s words several times in his mind, he ground his teeth in frustration.

“Not going?”

Going together. Just the two of them to the factory, then to the shoot afterward.

“I think I need to take care of Song Gi-hun soon.”

“What? Take care of him how?”

Hearing Jiheon’s small mutter, Jeongoh sharply questioned him. Jiheon smirked as if it were nothing.

“Just kidding, just kidding.”

***

“I just got a bad feeling all of a sudden.”

“It’s a joke.”

“Fine, fine. Just go to work already.”

Not wanting the argument to drag on, Jeongoh quickly cut off the conversation and pushed Jiheon toward the street. However, Jiheon did not

budge. He quickly added a condition.

“Alright. I’ll go to work without a fuss.”

“…”

“If you pull me into a corner and give me just one kiss.”

…The baby’s dad is so adorably charming.

What’s truly astonishing is that he’s serious about it.

A heavy sigh escaped Jeongoh’s lips.

***

Time passed, and it was now 5 PM.

After finishing her day at kindergarten, Yeona arrived at the Go academy, looking around restlessly during the class. She couldn’t see Dobin anywhere.

“Teacher, where’s Dobin?”

“Oh, Dobin went to the dentist and will be a bit late today. Do you want to wait for him before you leave?”

“Yes.”

Yeona replied to her teacher and also sent a text message to Guksun, saying it was okay if she picked her up late today. She found it amazing and convenient that she could directly contact someone.

She wanted to share her phone number with her friend Dobin as soon as possible. Yeona hung her cellphone around her neck so it would be visible.

The teacher called out to Yeona, who was returning to her seat with a smirk.

“Yeona, do you know Suin?”

Next to the teacher stood a girl about Yeona's age. She had long hair like a mermaid and was wearing a pretty headband.

"No, I don't know her."

"She's a friend who's also seven years old. Hong Suin."

Yeona greeted Suin.

"Hi, I'm Lee Yeona."

"Yeah, I know you."

Although Suin had only been at the Go academy for a week, she recognized Yeona because her mom had told her about her.

Unbeknownst to Yeona, she had gained popularity in the mothers' community. They said a Go prodigy had entered the academy—a seven-year-old girl who was incredibly smart.

Suin, who had been proud of her own intelligence, didn't want to acknowledge that there was someone her age who was smarter than her. She wanted to beat Yeona and prove her own genius.

"Teacher, can I play Go with Yeona?"

"Suin said she's played a lot of matches, right?"

"Yes."

Suin confidently replied. It was her chance to show off her skills, having learned Go from her dad and brother for over a year.

"Yeona, do you want to play a match?"

"Yes."

Yeona readily accepted the challenge. Knowing the competitive nature of both children, the teacher said,

“The most important thing in a match is to accept the outcome, no matter how it turns out. If you lose, don’t cry. Instead, think about why you lost, and you can play better next time. The same goes for winning. Even if you win, don’t mock your opponent. It’s good to review together and analyze which moves were strong and which were weak. Got it?”

“Yes.”

Both children answered boldly. Soon, they sat across from each other at the Go board, with Yeona playing as white and Suin as black.

As soon as Suin placed her stone, Yeona quickly made her move. It seemed as if Yeona was playing without thinking, her movements were so fast. The sound of the stones dropping on the board made Suin feel increasingly flustered.

Taking advantage of the teacher’s momentary absence, Suin spoke to Yeona.

“You know all the Korean, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know the multiplication tables?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then you don’t know what 7 times 7 is?”

“No, I do know that. It’s 49.”

“What about 9 times 6?”

“54.”

“If you don’t know the multiplication tables, how do you know that?”

Yeona drew a square on the Go board with her hand.

“I just make a Go board in my head and create nine groups of six stones and count them.”

Can you really count that quickly?

Suin narrowed her eyes and stared at Yeona.

“Do you know English?”

“No. Our kindergarten doesn’t teach English. But why aren’t you concentrating on the Go? You’re going to lose.”

While Suin was distracted, Yeona steadily increased her territory. Before long, she had built an area Suin couldn’t catch up to.

“Oh no! Please, I didn’t see it clearly, so I placed it wrong.”

“No. The teacher said you can’t let things slide in Go.”

Cornered, Suin pleaded, but Yeona wouldn’t relent. Ultimately, Suin suffered a devastating defeat.

As Suin stared hopelessly at the Go board, Yeona shouted,

“Teacher, I won!”

“Yeona, what did I say to do when you win?”

“Suin, let’s review. We need to think about why you lost. I’ll help you.”

Suin pouted, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I already know everything. I lost on purpose.”

Suin stood up first and left the classroom.

Waiting outside the other classroom for her class to finish, Suin dashed inside as soon as the door opened.

“Oppa!”

Jaeni was there. He was Suin’s older brother, who had started attending the Go academy a year before her. Suin, sniffling, grabbed Jaeni’s arm and spilled everything that had happened in the other classroom.

“Why are you crying over something like that?”

After hearing the story, Jaeni consoled his younger sister with an indifferent expression. He often fought with his sister and sometimes made her cry, but he couldn’t stand the thought of her being bullied by other kids.

Jaeni noticed Yeona returning from the bathroom while waiting for Dobin and approached her.

“Are you Lee Yeona?”

“Yes.”

“I heard you’re really good at Go.”

“Yes.”

“But why aren’t you going home? Is your mom not picking you up?”

“No, her mom works at a company.”

Suin, who had been lingering behind Jaeni, chimed in.

“Oh, so is your dad coming to get you?”

“No, her dad isn’t around.”

Suin interrupted again. Yeona felt flustered. Facing a larger brother and a friend with a sharp voice, she felt like a puppy that couldn’t bark. She didn’t understand why they were saying these things.

“Do you live with just your mom since your dad isn’t around?”

Jaeni asked, the corners of his lips curled up. She could tell he was mocking her.

“If you don’t have a dad, who taught you Go?”

“……No, I have a dad.”

Yeona answered, her voice trembling.

Jaeni turned to Suin.

“Hey, she said she has a dad.”

“No, she doesn’t! My mom said she doesn’t have a dad.”

Suin’s voice rose. She was sure she had heard her mom say that.

Her mom had said that Yeona was the smartest. A girl who didn’t even have a dad could play Go so well. That was something Suin could never forget.

Jaeni asked Yeona again.

“Are you lying? She says you don’t have a dad.”

“No, I have one.”

“Then call him.”

“…….”

“Go on, hurry up. You have your cellphone.”

Jaeni pointed at Yeona’s phone hanging around her neck.

Yeona fumbled with her phone, her hands shaking.

Suin pressed her.

“Come on, hurry up! Why can’t you?”

“…….”

“Don’t you even know your dad’s phone number?”

How can you know the multiplication tables and not know your dad’s phone number?

“You’re lying, aren’t you? About having a dad.”

Her mom had told her not to cry.

Yeona bit her lower lip and swallowed her tears. As she tried to hold back the tears that were already forming, her face felt hot. She was struggling to breathe. It felt like all the blood in her body was draining away. The sounds around her became muffled.

Even though she was frozen in place, the floor and ceiling seemed to flip upside down and spin around. Yeona tightly gripped her cellphone in her hand and fainted.

Ch86 - To My Beloved

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“Yeona!”

The principal, who had just exited the classroom, was startled to see Yeona and rushed over.

“Yeona! Yeona!”

The faces of the two children standing nearby turned pale.

“…Is she dead?”

Suin asked in a trembling voice.

The principal checked Yeona’s breathing and pupils, then slapped her cheek gently. Yeona, who had briefly opened her eyes, soon closed them again. The principal turned to the two children.

“What happened? How did she collapse?”

“We just asked her if she really had a dad, and she kept lying about having one…”

Jaeni replied with a scared expression. The principal looked stern but couldn’t blame them.

“I need to take her to the hospital. Can you tell the vice-principal?”

After instructing the children, the principal hurried away.

Jinseo and Dobin noticed the principal exiting the academy.

“Yeona!”

Jinseo rushed over after confirming that the principal was carrying Yeona.

“What happened? Why is our Yeona like this?”

“Teacher, what’s wrong with Yeona? Is she sick? Is she going to die?”

Dobin asked, his face in shock. The principal answered urgently.

“She collapsed. Her breathing is normal.”

“Have you contacted Yeona’s mom? Should I call?”

“Yes, please.”

While Jinseo contacted Yeona’s mother, the principal quickly hailed a taxi. The principal, Yeona, Jinseo, and Dobin all headed to the hospital together.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

– Are you doing well?

– Are you having fun?

– You didn’t reply. You must be really busy.

Jeongho chuckled as he read the three text messages sent by Jihun at noon.

It was amusing how Jihun was being unnecessarily grumpy while Jeongho was carrying out an important task.

“Manager, is something good happening?”

“Huh? No, no.”

At Gihoon’s question, Jeongho put his phone away in his bag.

He had been tasked with a significant duty: transporting filming beer from a factory near Seoul to a filming site in Gangneung, Gangwon Province.

It took a long time to check each beer for filming, and given the distance, they arrived at the filming location after 2 PM. It was scorching hot, but the weather was excellent for shooting.

After delivering the products to the staff and having a late lunch, Jeongho found himself lost in admiration of the scenery and the model's looks while watching the shoot. Before he knew it, it was already 4 PM. Jeongho and Gihoon greeted Miran and Yeonggwang before leaving the filming site.

Even leaving at 4 PM, they would reach Seoul around 7 PM.

After tackling the backlog of work at the company, he would likely be leaving late again tonight.

"Gihoon, it must be tough. I wish I could drive, but I have a learner's permit."

"Oh, I thought you didn't have a license."

"I do have one. I just don't have a car."

A few years ago, Jeongho had decided to get his license, thinking he would need one to raise a child, but since he didn't have a car, the license became useless.

Although his financial situation wasn't so dire that he couldn't afford a car, he started to weigh the cost-effectiveness once he made up his mind.

He used public transport for commuting, and when issues arose, he would take a taxi, so he hadn't felt a significant need for a personal vehicle.

After buying a cellphone for his child yesterday, he suddenly felt guilty. Jeongho hadn't purchased a car because he didn't see the necessity, but his child might feel hurt because of it.

If they had a car, they could have taken more extended trips and enjoyed themselves, but he hadn’t been able to do that for his child in the seven years of their life together.

‘Since we’re planning to go camping in the fall, should I get a car before then?’

No, wait. Wouldn’t my brother go with us then?

Imagining going camping with his child, Jihun, and Guksun and grilling meat made him feel good just thinking about it.

While Jeongho was smiling secretly, Gihoon asked,

“If you have a license, would you like to try driving?”

“You must be tired. If it’s too hard, I can call a designated driver.”

“No, it’s not that I’m tired. I thought it would be good for you to get some experience by taking the wheel, just for practice.”

“If you trust me with the wheel, I can’t guarantee your life.”

“Of course, I can trust my life to you, Manager.”

Gihoon replied cheerfully. Just then, Jeongho’s phone vibrated. The caller was Jinseo.

“Yes, Dobin’s mom?”

[Jeongho, are you at the office? Don’t be surprised, but listen carefully. Yeona collapsed at the academy and is on her way to the hospital.]

“Our Yeona?”

Although Jinseo urged him not to panic, Jeongho’s heart sank.

[Her breathing and pulse are normal. The principal said she briefly opened her eyes but then closed them again. We’re taking her to the hospital for

now, so please come.]
Jinseo quickly provided the hospital address and hung up. Jeongho couldn’t even properly respond with a “yes” before the call ended, and his trembling hand held the disconnected phone.

“What’s going on? What happened to the child?”

“Yeah. Gihoon… I think I need to go to the hospital…”

“To the hospital?”

“The child… collapsed.”

“Does she have consciousness?”

“Um, I… I don’t know, I’m not sure…”

“…”

“Gihoon, can you hurry… please?”

Jeongho spoke in a shaky voice, feeling as if all his senses had gone numb. His mind was hazy, and he couldn’t think clearly.

The car was speeding down the highway. Even if they rushed, it would take over an hour to reach the hospital.

“Manager, I’ll get there as quickly as I can. Don’t worry.”

Gihoon pressed down hard on the accelerator, reassuring Jeongho.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

Max Planning Office Corridor.

Having just returned from a meeting with a client, Jihun stared at his frozen phone and let out a frustrated sigh.

‘So she’s not going to reply?’

He had sent three text messages to Jeongho at noon, but she hadn’t responded.

Is your name Lee Jeongho or Mae Jeongho? How could you be so indifferent?

In any case, since she said she would be back at the office in the evening, he thought he would definitely get his revenge when they met. As he was heading back to his office, he spotted Seungkyu hurrying past.

Thinking he must be busy, Jihun decided not to say anything, but Seungkyu noticed him and ran over.

“Are you okay?”

“Huh? Why?”

“I heard Yeona collapsed?”

“…”

“I just got a call. They said Dobin’s mom and the principal took her to the hospital.”

Jihun felt his heart drop at those words.

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After the principal transferred Yeona, he left, leaving only Jinseo and Dobin in the hospital emergency room.

“Yeonaaaa! Yeonaaaa!”

Dobin wailed in front of the unconscious Yeona.

“Yeonaaaa, don’t die! I’ll take care of you!”

To my beloved, I couldn’t even say I love you.

Jinseo, who was struggling to hold it together, sighed and tried to calm Dobin.

“Dobin, Yeona isn’t going to die. Please be quiet.”

“Yeonaaaa!”

Despite this, Dobin’s voice remained loud. It was puzzling how he, who usually had to squeeze out tears, was now wailing so dramatically. Jinseo felt awkward because of the noisy child, having to bow his head repeatedly like a sinner to the people whose eyes met his.

Did this kid cry like this when I collapsed? I don’t think so.

The noise was so unbearable that they couldn’t stay in the hospital any longer. Fortunately, Guksun, who had received the call from Jinseo, arrived at the hospital shortly after. There was one advantage to all this wailing.

Guksun quickly found Yeona’s spot and rushed over.

Seeing Guksun, Jinseo stood up.

“Oh dear, our Yeona, what happened to our child? What’s wrong?”

Even Guksun, who had always been polite to Jinseo, prioritized the child over greetings. As Guksun, who had rushed in a panic, asked Jinseo, Dobin’s wailing continued.

“Yeonaaaa! Don’t die! Nooooo!”

“Why is our Yeona dying? Wh-what illness does she have?”

Dobin’s cries startled Guksun, who asked,

“Oh, no. They said Yeona collapsed from shock.”

Jinseo spoke cautiously, relaying what he had heard from the principal.

“It seems she’s under some stress… The kids her age were pressuring her about not having a dad.”

“Oh my goodness! Who would do that to our baby?”

Guksun’s voice grew agitated.

“So, does she still not have consciousness? What should we do?”

“The doctor thinks she’ll be fine. For now, they want to keep her hospitalized to monitor her condition.”

Only after checking the child’s status and calming down did Guksun express his gratitude.

“Oh, thank you. I’m so grateful and sorry, especially since Dobin’s mom isn’t well herself.”

“No, it’s okay. But I think we should go now. It’s about time Doyun got here, and Dobin is being a bit too much…”

“Oh dear, oh dear…”

As soon as he heard his name, Dobin, who had just mimicked Guksun’s previous sound, shouted even louder. Now, Dobin’s wailing felt like a desperate struggle. Reaching his limit, Jinseo gritted his teeth and said,

“Park Dobin, let’s go now.”

“Why?”

“Let’s go home. It’s almost time for Doyun to arrive.”

“Then Mom can go.”

“What? You little brat, come here quickly!”

In the end, Jinseo resorted to force to drag Dobin out. Dobin kept calling for Yeona as he was being pulled away, but she showed no signs of movement.

Guksun called in a staff member to expedite Yeona’s admission process. After transferring her to a hospital room, the doctor returned and reassured them that the child would be fine.

Hearing the doctor’s words eased Guksun’s tension. Once the shock began to fade, new worries suddenly emerged.

Fortunately, Jihun arrived just in time.

“Mother.”

“Oh dear, you’re here! Yeona’s father!”

“How is Yeona? Is she okay?”

“Yeah, they say there’s nothing wrong. She’ll stay overnight for observation and can be discharged tomorrow.”

“Still not awake?”

“They think she’s just sleeping, but we’ll have to keep an eye on her.”

Jihun, having checked on Yeona, knelt beside her bed and let out a deep sigh. It was obvious he had rushed over, eyebrows raised with concern.

“You must have been really worried.”

“Ah, yes. I ran out of the restaurant. I can’t even remember if I closed the door properly or if I turned off the gas.”

“Don’t worry about that. Just go take care of things. Should I go instead?”

“No, I’ll go.”

Guksun waved his hand dismissively.

“I’m just glad that Yeona’s father is here. Thank you for coming so quickly.”

As her father, it was the least I could do.

Guksun’s gratitude made Jihun feel a bit awkward.

After Guksun hurried off, Jihun was left alone in the hospital room with Yeona.

This was the second time he was seeing the sleeping child, but it was the first time in a well-lit room. Even while unwell, she looked angelic.

A heavy energy surrounded her sweet face. Although the doctor had said it was nothing serious, Jihun couldn’t help but worry.

Occasionally, Yeona’s hands twitched as if having a spasm. Jihun placed his fingers gently on her palm. Yeona tightened her grip around his hand.

Ch87 - Really, Really, Really, Really

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I always have the same regrets. Everyday life with my child is always precious, yet why do I overlook that preciousness? Why do I only realize its importance when I'm in a desperate situation?

On the day my child was at risk of being kidnapped, I also came to understand that importance only after the incident happened.

As Jeong-oh was leaving the hospital, he learned from Jinseo a brief account of why Yeona collapsed. Apparently, other children had been teasing her about not having a father.

What did I do to my child? What did I say to my seven-year-old?

Jeong-oh found himself regretting the past as well.

He taught his child that there was no need to feel ashamed of not having a father. Since he had lived that way himself, he thought his child could overcome it as well.

Yet, one day, without any warning, he casually revealed the existence of the father. He told the confused child to call Jihun "Dad." And today…

"Yeona has been crying too much lately. Let's try not to cry today, okay?"

The child naturally cries; it's perfectly fine to do so. Even adults cry when they're hurting. Yet, just because the child has been shedding more tears

lately, he assigned her the difficult task of overcoming her own childishness.

How hard must it have been for her? How much pain must she have felt?

Noticing Jeong-oh's tear-stained face, Gi-hun increased his speed.

Both Jeong-oh and Gi-hun were pressed for time. In the midst of it all, Jeong-oh's phone vibrated again. This time it was Jihun.

Jeong-oh hesitated before answering the call.

"Yes, Director."

[This is the hospital. I called to check on you, so you wouldn't worry.]
Jihun's calm voice made Jeong-oh close his eyes tightly. Tears slipped down his eyelids.

[You're on your way to Seoul, right?]
"……."

[Lee Jeong-oh.]
"……."

[Jeong-oh.]
The soothing tone of his voice continued to come through. Instead of calming him, it stirred his emotions, and Jeong-oh's throat tightened. He finally managed to respond.

"……Yes, Director."

[Don't worry. Yeona is okay.]
"……."

[Be careful on your way. See you soon.]
Jeong-oh tightly held the phone after it disconnected, finally letting the tears fall. Surprised by his tears, Gi-hun asked in alarm,

“What did the Director say? Please don’t tell me he’s telling you to work overtime even in such a serious situation!”

“No, it’s not that…”

He struggled to find an excuse, but it felt as if a boulder was lodged in his head, making it hard to articulate his thoughts.

“He must not know. If he knew and still said that, he’d be a terrible person.”

Gi-hun, misinterpreting Jeong-oh’s heavy reaction, grew agitated. Jeong-oh felt sorrowful, and Gi-hun’s heart ached for him.

Gi-hun made a vow. He must protect Lee Jeong-oh from Jeong Ji-heon, that heartless superior who has no blood or tears.

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Eun-yeob learned that Ji-heon had canceled all his schedules today and was heading to the hospital in a hurry.

“Why? Why the hospital?”

After contacting various places and stubbornly digging for information, Eun-yeob discovered that Yeona had collapsed at her academy and had been taken to the hospital. He immediately rushed to the hospital.

Now, Ji-heon and Jeong-oh were sharing the existence of the child. Eun-yeob was able to deduce that easily.

So what’s next? It’s certain that he will attempt a paternity test again in the near future. Perhaps even at the very hospital where the child is currently admitted.

If that happens, I will ruin that paternity test, no matter what. Then, eventually, Ji-heon will give up and begin to doubt Jeong-oh.

Fortunately, there was someone he knew at the hospital where Yeona was admitted. A fairly close acquaintance. Eun-yeob made sure to tell them to

let him know if anyone requested a paternity DNA test before leaving the hospital.

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Yeona’s hospital room.

Ji-heon stared at his phone screen for a long time. A message had come in from the counselor he had assigned a task to. It was a text informing him that Eun-yeob had suddenly visited the hospital. The name of the hospital where Ji-heon was currently staying was embedded in the message.

Amidst the serious situation of his child lying unconscious, he had only been filled with worry, but after reading the message, he couldn’t help but let out a hollow laugh in disbelief.

Are they monitoring each other?

The person chasing me, I was also chasing after them.

Before learning about Yeona, he had vaguely thought that Chae Eun-bi was the problem, but now he felt that Chae Eun-yeob was even more malicious than Eun-bi.

Even while glancing at his phone, one of Ji-heon’s hands remained grasped by Yeona. He placed the phone on the bedside table and refocused on Yeona.

He noticed that a significant amount of the medication was already used up. The nurse had asked him to inform her when half of it was gone.

“Yeona, I’m going to tell the nurse.”

Ji-heon softly spoke to the child who had yet to wake up. However, just as he was about to withdraw his finger from her grasp, he felt her grip tighten even more.

Though her grip was weak enough that he could easily pull away, Ji-heon couldn’t let go. There was something desperate in her demeanor.

“Yeona, Daddy will be right back.”

Once again, her grip strengthened. It was remarkable that the child was responding to his voice, and Ji-heon found himself unable to move.

Is she hearing my voice in her dreams? What kind of dream is she having right now?

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There were many times when something I desperately wished for did not come true. There were moments when I gave up first to avoid disappointment.

“I wish I had a dad too.”

“Should I ask? I’ll tell my dad to be your dad too.”

“Maybe that won’t work?”

One day, his friend Do-bin offered to share his dad with him. Do-bin’s innocent suggestion made Yeona’s heart race, but as always, she masked her excitement and replied calmly.

She had to do that. Yeona had always been confident and composed. She felt no shame in not having a father. She knew her mother would always protect her.

“Not having a dad isn’t something to be ashamed of. It’s more shameful to tease someone about it. If anyone makes fun of you, tell your mom or your teacher. Then either your mom or your teacher will scold that friend, okay?”

Thanks to her mother, Yeona could talk about her dad without a care.

Even when a man asked about her father, and even when the head teacher at her academy, who initially knew nothing, asked about him, Yeona would respond without hesitation, “I don’t have a dad.”

Those words spread throughout the academy before Yeona even realized it.

Her fame as a Go prodigy was further enhanced by the gossip that she was the daughter of a single mother. Some mothers who sent their children to the academy grew jealous of Yeona while also feeling sympathy for her unfortunate situation.

I shouldn’t have done that. I shouldn’t have loudly declared, “I don’t have a dad.”

No, on the day that man came to our house, I shouldn’t have yelled at him to leave.

This morning, I should have told him I got a cell phone. I should have asked for his phone number.

Regretful moments kept flooding into her mind. The weight of life that a seven-year-old had come to understand pressed down on her eyelids, making them heavy. Even in her dreams, she felt drowsy.

In her dreams, Yeona sat at a Go board with her dad, wrapped in the aurora that engulfed the world.

“Yeona, you can’t take back a wrong move. But you can play better next time.”

The dad in her dream spoke to Yeona.

The dad in her dreams changed his face each time. Today, he looked somewhat like her Go academy teacher. There was a time when she thought it would be nice if her Go teacher were her dad, and it felt like that dream had come true.

But even that disappears when she wakes up. It seemed the dad in her dreams understood that if she remembered him, she would long for him.

It disappears. Always.

Thinking about that made Yeona’s heart race faster. Her face twisted, and she spoke through her tears.

“It’s okay if there’s no dad. But if he exists and then disappears, that can’t happen.”

Please don’t disappear. That’s too scary.

“You said a wrong move can’t be taken back. So, don’t do that, Dad.”

If you’ve come this far, stay by my side. Don’t leave me.

At Yeona’s words, the dad in her dream merely smiled and fumbled with the Go stones. There was only one stone inside his Go container.

No.

If I grab that stone and set it down, the game will end, and my dad will disappear. In a panic, Yeona sat up and grabbed her dad’s hand.

At that moment, the Go stone fell.

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“Yeona.”

Yeona opened her eyes, but everything in front of her was still blurry.

She could only hear the calm voice of the man she had heard that morning.

Yeona blinked slowly. She was tightly holding onto two of his fingers with one of her hands.

“Are you okay? Can you see Daddy?”

She saw him.

The man she had first met when she was seven, who called himself her dad.

Was it because the scary siblings she met at the academy had disappeared, or because she felt so weak?

She opened her eyes in this unfamiliar space without her mother or grandmother, and the only person she could see was that man she had despised so much. Yet surprisingly, she felt at ease. The confession she had kept bottled up inside her began to flow out.

“I didn’t know your phone number…”

“…”

“I couldn’t call.”

Her mother had told her not to cry, but as soon as she spoke, tears began to flow down her cheeks without pause.

Startled, Ji-heon reached into the bed and pulled Yeona into his embrace. Leaning against his chest, Yeona couldn’t stop her tears. Her face kept contorting as it did in her dreams.

“I wanted to call, but I didn’t know your number…”

“Did you want to call me… Daddy?”

“I bought a cell phone…”

“…”

“The kids told me to call you…”

“Call me every day, okay? You can do that.”

Ji-heon said calmly while gently stroking Yeona’s back. The weighty resonance of his low voice momentarily eased Yeona’s tears.

“Really?”

“Of course. Anytime. I’ll always answer.”

“No.”

Yeona shook her head at Ji-heon’s answer. What she wanted to ask wasn’t that.

“Are you really my dad?”

The important thing wasn’t the call.

In the end, it wasn’t about the call.

What mattered most was.

“Really, really, really? Are you my dad?”

“I’m your dad.”

The real dad, who would never disappear again.

Ji-heon nodded firmly.

“Really, really, really really.”

“…”

“It’s real. I’m really your dad.”

“…”

“I’m Yeona’s dad. I’m really Yeona’s dad.”

Waaah.

Uwaaaah.

She wasn’t sad anymore. But then a bigger cry erupted. Like she did with her mother, that stubborn cry filled the hospital room.

Yeona playfully hit her dad’s face as if to scold him.

“Why did you come now?”

With each slap from the seven-year-old, Ji-heon, who was smiling gently, pulled Yeona in close and comforted her.

“Why did you come now? I missed you so much!”

She missed a dad she didn’t even know. The face of the dad from her dreams faded away when she woke up.

Did that mean she didn’t have to change her dad’s face anymore?

Could she say that her dad existed?

Could she call her dad whenever she wanted?

Is it okay to do everything? Is everything alright?

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“…”

“I’m sorry for coming late.”

Ji-heon pulled Yeona into a tight hug and gently rubbed her back.

The solid warmth he provided was something she felt again. In that broad chest, her dad’s voice rang out like the whole world. He was smiling. No, it seemed like he was crying too.

“Dad!”

Yeona stretched out her arms to hug him back.

Ch88 - Suffering Regardless

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The car driven by Gi-hun arrived at the hospital around 7 PM. They were able to speed on the highway, but once they entered the city of Seoul, they faced heavy traffic. Due to rush hour, they encountered jams in various places. Still, they managed to arrive relatively quickly.

As Jeong-oh got out of the car in front of the hospital, she thanked Gi-hun.

“Gi-hun, thank you so much. You really worked hard today.”

“It’s nothing. Hurry and go see the baby.”

Gi-hun waved his hand. Jeong-oh waved back and turned to run.

She had reassured both Guk-soon and Ji-heon that everything was okay, but once she arrived at the hospital, her heart began to race again. Unable to wait for the elevator that descended so slowly, Jeong-oh dashed up the emergency stairs.

On the sixth floor, where the patient rooms were lined up, Jeong-oh reached the corridor out of breath and looked around to check the room numbers. It seemed that Yeona’s room was at the very end of the hallway.

Hurrying down the corridor, Jeong-oh spotted Guk-soon leaning against the wall outside the room.

“Mom.”

“You’re here?”

Before Jeong-oh could ask why she wasn’t entering the room, Guk-soon gestured with her chin toward the door. The hospital room door was slightly ajar. Guk-soon was peering through the small gap to see inside.

She could see Ji-heon holding Yeona in his arms. Yeona was nestled comfortably against him. She seemed to be asleep, but every now and then, faint hiccup sounds could be heard.

It appeared that after crying, Yeona’s breathing was uneven, and even in her sleep, she was still hitching a bit. Jeong-oh’s eyes welled up upon seeing the tranquil scene before her.

They accepted each other. The child and the father, the father and the child.

“They’re both so beautiful.”

Guk-soon whispered quietly, as if blending into the air.

.....

After dropping Jeong-oh off at the hospital, Gi-hun returned to the office.

Mi-ran and Yeong-gwang were at the filming site, so Ko Eun-joo, who had been alone guarding the office all day, asked him a question.

“Where’s this assistant?”

“She’s at the hospital. The baby collapsed.”

“Oh, really?”

Eun-joo had witnessed Ji Ji-heon canceling all of his subsequent schedules and rushing out of the company a few hours earlier. She vaguely remembered hearing the word “hospital.”

She thought someone must have gotten hurt, but it turned out to be Jeong-oh’s child who had collapsed. Eun-joo guessed that Ji-heon would be at the hospital.

They must be quite close.

After observing Eun-joo's reaction, Gi-hun tilted his head and asked.

"You don't seem that surprised."

"No, I was shocked."

"Phew. My breath was caught on the road. If I felt this way, I wonder how this assistant must have felt."

Gi-hun vented about the situation at that time.

"But it seems like Ji Ji-heon called and gave you some work to do. Knowing your personality, I thought you'd question why you had to deal with something when a child had collapsed. But you just listened quietly, saying, 'Yes, Director, yes, Director.'"

"…"

"You were completely demoralized. I can't imagine how heartbroken you must have been."

Gi-hun, that's not it…

Knowing the relationship between Jeong-oh and Ji-heon, Eun-joo felt sorry for Gi-hun but remained silent, unable to say anything.

"Um? Why do you look like that? Is there something on my face?"

"Not that, but you've turned a bit red."

"Ah, haha…"

At Eun-joo's words, Gi-hun touched his slightly flushed cheek.

What can I say? A pure young man who blushes just from talking about this assistant.

Eun-joo resolutely turned her head away.

I don’t know. I won’t say anything till the end.

Jeong-oh, you reap what you sow.

.....

After laying the sleeping child back down on the bed, Ji-heon came out into the hallway in front of the hospital room and spoke to Jeong-oh and Guk-soon about the next steps.

“First, we need to do a paternity test.”

“Okay. Can we do it here? It would be great to do it since we’re at the hospital.”

“It’s not possible at this hospital.”

In response to Guk-soon’s question, Ji-heon answered.

“Why not?”

“Well…”

Ji-heon hesitated for a moment before speaking honestly.

“I have a friend named Chae Eun-yeop. As you might guess from his name, he’s the brother of Chae Eun-bi, and he’s been trying to marry me off to her for a long time. I confirmed that he visited the hospital today. I’m worried he might try to sabotage the paternity test.”

“Oh my, there are all sorts of people in the world.”

“Right? Blood really doesn’t lie. They’re not your average siblings.”

Guk-soon lamented, and Jeong-oh chimed in.

“But is it true that he’s going to get married alone? Isn’t it because Yeona’s dad and Chae Eun-bi had something going on that the brother is acting this way?”

“Oh, that’s not it; there’s a bit of a backstory…”

Ji-heon stammered, flustered. Guk-soon quickly cut him off, waving her hand.

“Okay, that’s possible. Seven years is quite a long time. If such a pretty girl is a friend’s sister, I’d want to marry her too.”

“No, mother, it’s not like that.”

“Only our Jeong-oh lived a good life, raising a child and working diligently.”

“Mother, I also lived a good life…”

“Alright, alright. Let’s put the past behind us; it’s fine.”

“No, really, I’ve never, I feel wronged…”

“Ugh, I need to go now. You two take good care of Yeona and make sure she gets discharged well tomorrow.”

Without listening to Ji-heon’s words until the end, Guk-soon stepped away, only expressing her own lament.

“If you need anything, just call.”

“Okay. Mom, thank you. Hurry and go in.”

Ji-heon felt extremely wronged, while Jeong-oh found his expression amusing and chuckled as she greeted him. Ji-heon immediately chased after Guk-soon.

“I’ll see you off.”

“Just stay here.”

“…”

“After such an emotional reunion, what would happen if you disappeared when the baby opened her eyes again? Wouldn’t she think, ‘Did Daddy lie again?’ Just focus on taking good care of her, and don’t worry about me.”

Guk-soon’s words were indeed wise. Ji-heon halted in his tracks, taking Guk-soon’s advice to heart. Guk-soon called out to him with a smile.

“Yeona’s daddy.”

“Yes?”

“You’ve worked hard. Thank you.”

After Guk-soon left, the hospital room was left with just Jeong-oh, Ji-heon, and the peacefully sleeping Yeona.

“Yeona’s friends at the academy said something to her about not having a dad.”

Jeong-oh shared what had happened to Yeona earlier that day, ending her sentence with a long sigh.

“I really messed up. I taught Yeona that not having a dad is nothing to be ashamed of.”

An inescapable sense of guilt followed her. The words she had instilled in her to help her survive and navigate this harsh world had instead hurt her child. The world was far too vast for a seven-year-old to bear.

“I thought I would live my whole life like this. I never imagined I would meet my brother again.”

Ji-heon gently stroked Jeong-oh’s head. His own heart ached for her.

He remembered what Jeong-oh had said during their pitch presentation for the Mi&Talk competition. She had mentioned that mothers often grieved over things they hadn’t given, even when they had already given so much.

Even during the times when he felt resentful towards her, he thought that was a beautiful sentiment. Yet it wasn’t just a simple, wonderful saying.

The guilt of mothers who believe they aren’t enough, even when they are doing their best at every moment. Ji-heon hadn’t been able to understand that back then.

“It’s not your fault. You were doing your best back then. You really did well.”

He spoke to comfort her. He could see just how hard she had worked by looking at her family, the child she had raised, and her career. Ji-heon had not achieved that.

Jeong-oh, you deserve more praise and comfort.

Drawn by his feelings, his shoulder leaned towards her, and his lips lingered over the tears clinging to her eyelashes. In that moment,

“Mommy!”

Yeona woke up, whining.

“Oh! Yeona.”

Startled, as if caught in the act of stealing, Jeong-oh rushed over, feeling as though she hadn’t done anything. In the children’s ward where they were, Ji-heon, sitting on the floor, was out of Yeona’s line of sight. As Jeong-oh ran over first, Yeona asked,

“Where’s Daddy?”

“Daddy is right here.”

Ji-heon quickly stepped closer to show his face to Yeona.

“I want water.”

“Okay. Our Yeona wants water, water.”

“No.”

As Jeong-oh flustered about bringing Yeona water, she pointed at Ji-heon.

“Okay. Daddy will get it for you.”

Named by Yeona, Ji-heon poured water from the cup Jeong-oh was holding and fed it to Yeona. Yeona didn’t move a finger until she finished the water. It was understandable, given that it was past 10 PM and she hadn’t eaten dinner yet.

After Yeona emptied the cup, Jeong-oh asked,

“Is our princess not hungry?”

“I’m hungry.”

“What do you want to eat?”

“Cup ramen.”

Ah, even at times like this, she’s still a chip off the old block.

Since she couldn’t have cup noodles at home, this adorable child seized the opportunity to demand them when her mother’s resolve weakened. Jeong-oh looked at Ji-heon with a resigned expression at Yeona’s opportunistic behavior.

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The next morning.

Following the attending physician’s assessment of Yeona’s recovery, Jeong-oh began the discharge process. She decided to take a day off to monitor Yeona’s condition.

Ji-heon also planned to stay, but the situation was not exactly comfortable. Even as they were leaving the hospital with Yeona, his phone kept ringing with work-related calls.

Seeing her father working for the first time, Yeona looked a bit down.

“Mom, is Daddy always this busy?”

“Yes, he is busy, but he can be with us for a long time today.”

From the driver’s seat, Ji-heon heard their conversation and spoke to Yeona.

“Yeona, no matter how busy Daddy is, I’ll always answer your calls. So if you miss me, just call anytime.”

Hearing Ji-heon’s words lifted Yeona’s spirits, and she beamed with a smile. Ji-heon had set a speed dial for his number on Yeona’s phone yesterday. Mom was number 1, Grandma was number 2, so Ji-heon became number 0. Yeona had already memorized his phone number.

With no traffic, the car carrying the three of them quickly reached Jeong-oh’s house. After Ji-heon parked, he opened the back seat door, and Yeona spread her arms wide. He recalled what Dobin had said: that Daddy always lifts him up when going to the hospital.

Jeong-oh was taken aback by Yeona’s actions, but Ji-heon casually asked her,

“Do you want Daddy to carry you, or just hold you?”

“Carry me! Like a koala!”

Ji-heon turned his back to Yeona.

“Yeona, you need to walk on your own.”

“Ew, no! I don’t want to!”

Ignoring Jeong-oh’s admonitions, Yeona climbed onto Ji-heon’s back.

I’ll have to show Dobin that Daddy carries me when we come back from the hospital. Yeona’s heart swelled with excitement as she made this new memory in her seven-year-old life.

“Yeona, Daddy’s going to collapse. You need to think about your weight.”

“Mom said I’m as light as a feather.”

“That’s just the power of love! Where can you find a 20-kilogram feather?”

Jeong-oh wanted to protect Ji-heon, but Ji-heon effortlessly carried Yeona and led the way, saying,

“No, our Yeona is really as light as a feather.”

With Ji-heon acting like this, Jeong-oh had no choice but to go along. She sighed and followed the two of them up the stairs.

After climbing to the fourth floor and opening the front door, Yeona continued her demands. She clung to Ji-heon’s back and insisted,

“Shoe, shoe! You need to take off my shoes!”

“Oh, right. Shoes.”

As Ji-heon took off Yeona’s shoes, she pointed toward the bathroom.

“I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Okay, bathroom.”

It wasn’t until they reached the bathroom that Yeona released her grip on Ji-heon’s arms. After Yeona entered the bathroom, Ji-heon greeted Guk-soon.

“Mother, I’m back.”

“Oh dear! You worked hard, Yeona’s daddy. You’ve been through a lot.”

Just as Guk-soon was about to hand Ji-heon a drink, they heard Yeona calling from the bathroom.

“Daddy, my hands!”

“Hands? Oh, hands.”

Ji-heon, who had been blinking, immediately walked into the bathroom.

It was amusing to see a child who entrusted even washing her hands to her father, causing both Jeong-oh and Guk-soon to burst into laughter simultaneously.

A seven-year-old has turned into a three-year-old overnight. She’s really treating her dad like a servant.

“Whether it’s the child asking for something or the dad who grants every whim….”

“You wanted them to get close quickly, didn’t you?” Guk-soon pointed out Jeong-oh’s complaints.

Jeong-oh pouted in protest. “When did I say that? I just said it’s too bad for my brother.”

“Just too bad? You said it’s way too bad, way too.”

Jeong-oh huffed as if refusing to acknowledge it. Guk-soon teased her.

“Why? Are you jealous?”

“No, I’m not!”

Jeong-oh shook her head and smiled.

Mr. Jeong Ji-heon, it seems you’re struggling just the same whether Yeona accepts you or not.

Since you’re going to struggle anyway, it’s better to love her while you’re at it.

In truth, Ji-heon thought Yeona’s position was excellent.

Ch89 - Paternity Test

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Yeona sat on Ji-heon’s lap, eating her meal.

It was adorable to see the child, who had even learned how to use chopsticks, open her mouth like a baby bird whenever her father brought her food. Jeong-oh couldn’t bring herself to say anything. It was a happy mealtime.

After lunch, Ji-heon said to Yeona,

“Yeona, Daddy has something to tell you.”

“Okay.”

“We’re going back to the hospital.”

Today’s agenda was to conduct a paternity test.

Ji-heon had arranged everything, which was why he had been so busy in the morning.

“This time, we’re not going to the hospital because Yeona is sick; we’re going because we need to have a test. It’s a test to stamp that you’re Daddy’s daughter.”

“How do we do that?”

Yeona asked, her expression stiffening at Ji-heon’s explanation. The idea of a test to prove she was Daddy’s daughter made her nervous again.

“We’ll take a little blood from you and a little blood from Daddy to do the test.”

“How?”

Yeona turned her head to ask Jeong-oh, who was sitting beside her.

“Mom, how can they say I’m Daddy’s daughter by taking blood? All blood is red.”

The daughter who had been chatting with her father turned to her mother for an answer to this difficult question. Jeong-oh’s face flushed.

I don’t know. Mom doesn’t know. I’m a liberal arts major through and through…

The part of her brain that couldn’t explain a blood test was crying silently.

Meanwhile, Yeona changed her target.

“If they take my blood, can they stamp it?”

The daughter who had been bossing her father around like a wild pony suddenly seemed to regain her composure and asked Ji-heon politely. The child was still in a confused state, as mixed up as her use of formal and informal speech. She needed a step-by-step explanation.

Ji-heon showed Yeona his thumb and asked,

“Do you see the fingerprint on Daddy’s finger?”

“Yeah. I have a fingerprint too!”

“That’s right. Do you know that this fingerprint is different for everyone?”

“Yeah. I learned that in daycare.”

“Exactly. So even if you get lost and forget your address, if you register this fingerprint at the police station, they can help you find your home. The

fingerprint acts like a map to your house.”

After explaining fingerprints, Ji-heon searched for a 1000x magnification video of blood cells on his phone and showed it to Yeona. It was a video where she could see red blood cells and white blood cells.

“We have something like this in our bodies. Look. This is blood magnified 1000 times under a microscope.”

Yeona scrunched her face in disgust and turned her head away.

“Ew. That’s gross.”

“Is it just gross?”

“It looks like frog eggs.”

“Exactly. What looks red to our eyes actually contains these frog-egg-like things. If you magnify it more, you can see a blueprint or map imprinted in our blood. There’s a map in our blood like a fingerprint.”

Ji-heon patiently explained without tiring. Yeona listened attentively, as if she truly understood everything.

“A blood test is a way to find that map. Daddy and Yeona have very similar maps because that’s what makes you Daddy’s daughter.”

“So our maps in the blood are similar?”

“Yeah, they are.”

Yeona’s eyes sparkled with Ji-heon’s confident answer. She gazed intently at the blood video that she had just found disgusting moments ago.

A map in my blood!

The fact that the map inside me, which I can’t see unless it’s magnified thousands of times, is similar to my dad’s is such an amazing story. Yeona’s heart swelled with pride.

“Mom, I want to go for the test right now!”

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Jeong-oh gathered the necessary paperwork for the paternity test and went to the laboratory with Ji-heon. It was a research lab located within a fairly large health examination center.

Jeong-oh filled out Yeona’s consent form for the paternity test and followed the instructions to move on. Ji-heon was the first to have his blood drawn. As the dark red blood flowed from his arm, Yeona’s expression stiffened.

“Now it’s your turn, Yeona. You can do it, right? If you endure it well, Mommy will buy you ice cream later.”

Noticing that Yeona seemed very nervous, Jeong-oh coaxed her with the promise of ice cream and sat her on her lap. Yeona twisted her body, pale with fear. However, she did not firmly refuse.

It was impressive to see her endure the thin vaccination needle despite her serious demeanor.

Finally, the needle was inserted into the child’s arm. Ji-heon held Yeona’s other hand, and Jeong-oh hugged the child, who had tightly shut her eyes, comforting her. During the blood draw, Yeona groaned in distress.

“All done.”

The nurse said as she pulled out the needle.

“Mommy!”

As soon as the needle was removed, Yeona jumped into her mother’s arms, having not been able to breathe during the blood draw.

“You did well, our little one. You did great.”

Jeong-oh praised her daughter for overcoming the frightening moment.

Yeona was so tense that she fell fast asleep in the car on the way home. Ji-heon carried her to her room.

Carrying a child up to the fourth floor. Ji-heon had done it twice today without any struggle, which had become quite a burden for Jeong-oh over time.

After laying the child down, Ji-heon came out to the living room, where Jeong-oh thanked him.

“Thank you for carrying Yeona.”

“Not at all.”

“And thank you for explaining the blood test earlier.”

“Not at all.”

“Still, it’s better when the two of us combine our brains.”

“Jeong-oh, you need to speak accurately.”

Ji-heon, who had been casually responding with “not at all,” now replied sternly to Jeong-oh.

“It’s not that we combined our brains; it’s that I explained everything. Your brain had nothing to do with explaining the blood test; my brain did all the explaining.”

Hmm. That’s true, but it makes me feel a bit uneasy.

The warm feelings of gratitude Jeong-oh had just felt toward Ji-heon suddenly turned cold. Jeong-oh’s expression became sour as well.

“Some people are always trying to ride on others’ coattails.”

“What? Spoon? Or is it a Tuesday spoon?”

In response to Jiheon’s provocation, Jeong-o’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“Unbelievable, just unbelievable! Who’s talking about spoons right now? Thank goodness I raised the kid myself. If you had raised our Yena, I wouldn’t even be able to say she’s my daughter anywhere.”

“Getting riled up, aren’t we?”

Jiheon, pleased with himself for teasing Jeong-o, laughed heartily. In the meantime, Yena woke up and opened the door. She had been awakened by Jeong-o’s raised voice.

“Mom, are you fighting with Dad?”

“No, we’re not fighting! Mom and Dad are just talking.”

Jeong-o hastily tried to smooth things over, but Yena’s sulky expression didn’t improve. Yena turned to Jiheon.

“Dad, don’t fight with Mom.”

Jiheon’s expression was relaxed and gentle.

“Dad isn’t fighting. Mom is just too pretty, so Dad isn’t angry at all.”

Jeong-o was even more astounded by his nonchalance.

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Yesterday and today, Eun-yeob had been keeping an eye on Jiheon.

Both yesterday and this morning, Jiheon had not undergone a paternity test. Eun-yeob had assumed the test would be done since Yena was hospitalized, but it seemed that Eun-yeob’s thoughts had raced ahead of the situation. The hospital had not received any request for a paternity test either.

However, Eun-yeob couldn’t sit idly by. He continuously tracked Jiheon’s movements and communications. Fortunately, he managed to gather quite a bit of information. Jeong Jiheon was preparing to undergo a paternity test at a specialized institution. After much effort, Eun-yeob felt a thrill of joy.

‘So he’s planning to get the paternity test done somewhere else? He’s trying to use his head, at least.’

He felt amused, thinking he understood Jiheon’s anxious mindset, trying to hide something from him.

Eun-yeob identified a contact at the specialized institution where Jiheon had made the reservation and quickly reached out with a tempting proposal.

“Are you having trouble with your spouse holding something over your head, making divorce difficult? I can help you resolve this cleanly. If you check my credentials, you’ll see I’m trustworthy.”

Consultation that scratches at someone’s sore spot tends to work far better than mere cash. Eun-yeob targeted the other party’s weakness and delivered promises that soothed their anxieties. The staff member bit eagerly.

“All you need to do is block one paternity test. My nephew will be going to the research center. I’ve told him it’s just for a simple health checkup. Please switch my nephew’s blood with the client’s blood so that it absolutely cannot yield a positive result. The client’s name could be Jeong Jiheon, Lee Yena, or Lee Jeong-o. In any case, just make sure the blood for the test is swapped with Jiheon’s set.”

Eun-yeob displayed meticulousness, aiming to match the results of this genetic test with the previously manipulated one. If the DNA sequences matched the previous test results, Jiheon would have no choice but to believe it.

The staff member diligently fulfilled Eun-yeob’s request. They even took precautions to cover up any unforeseen issues as a result of other staff’s mistakes.

After being restless and busy over the past two days, Eun-yeob finally caught his breath.

When he first heard that the initial test was erroneous, one might consider it a mere fluke. Jang Young-mi would want to trust the test results, but at the

same time, she would also try to believe Jiheon’s claims.

But what if the second test result also showed a discrepancy? And if the genetic values remained unchanged?

Once is a mistake, but twice is a certainty.

Then Lee Jeong-o would undeniably be a fraud.

Having completed his task without incident, Eun-yeob visited Eun-bi’s house.

Eun-bi, who had been living like a recluse for several days without stepping outside, did not welcome her brother. She had expected him to bring some positive outcome, but since he told her not to do anything, nothing had changed.

“Must be nice.”

“You told me not to do anything. Is there anything I can do?”

“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t go to work.”

“When did you ever say I shouldn’t go? And do you know how hellish that place is for me right now?”

Eun-bi snapped at Eun-yeob.

“I’m going to change jobs. When you see Jeong Jiheon, just tell him you ruined my entire life.”

Eun-yeob smiled bitterly, then hardened his expression and said,

“Listen closely, Cha Eun-bi.”

“…….”

“Today, Jeong Jiheon is going to conduct a paternity test for Lee Yena, and the result will come back as ‘no possibility of paternity.’”

“No possibility? How do you know that?” Eun-bi asked.

Eun-yeob said nothing in response. However, with just his gaze, Eun-bi could guess her brother’s intentions. With a horrified expression, she asked, “Did you manipulate that?”

“You just need to go comfort Jiheon and Madam Jang. Approach them with the mindset that you understand everything. Got it?”

Eun-yeob spoke casually. In Eun-bi’s eyes, her brother seemed just as terrifying as Jiheon.

Eun-bi knew that the path her brother was on was a swamp. The deeper he sank, the harder it would be to escape.

“… Sometimes I feel like you’re even more obsessed with Jiheon than I am.”

“That’s because I’ve invested too much in you.”

“…….”

“I have to recoup what I’ve invested.”

Eun-yeob flashed a confident smile. He was looking forward to what would happen in a few hours.

Ch90 - Finally Met

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As promised, Jeong-o bought ice cream for Yena. Jiheon didn’t join them; he dropped Jeong-o and Yena off at the ice cream shop and left.

After spending time together since last night, Yena felt disappointed again when her dad disappeared.

“Mom, isn’t Dad coming to eat ice cream?”

“Dad has something to do. He’s probably talking with his father right now. That means Yena’s grandfather.”

“Yena has a grandfather too?”

“Yes. Isn’t it fascinating?”

Despite Jeong-o’s exciting story, Yena couldn’t smile. Honestly, she was anxious.

“But Mom, what if the test results say I’m not Dad’s daughter? Then Grandpa wouldn’t be Yena’s grandfather, right?”

Jeong-o pulled Yena close and hugged her tightly, feeling troubled by her worries.

How could she explain this?

“You don’t have to worry about that. If Yena is Dad’s daughter, it’s like planting beans and getting beans or planting red beans and getting red beans.”

“But you could not get beans or red beans.”

“Why wouldn’t you get beans or red beans? You planted them, didn’t you?”

“The seeds need water, sunlight, good soil, and protection from pests to sprout, grow leaves, and bear fruit. That’s what my teacher said.”

“Oh my, my smart daughter.”

That’s right. Raising a child requires the entire village. It requires tremendous attention and immense love.

Jeong-o beamed with pride and hugged Yena even tighter. Just as they finished their ice cream, Jeong-o’s phone vibrated. The results had come in.

“Yena, let’s go see Dad now.”

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Jiheon informed his parents, Jaekwang and Young-mi, that he had also undergone the paternity test. He told them which facility he used and when the results would come out, and by the appointed time, his parents arrived.

“Mother, you came too.”

Jiheon hadn’t expected Young-mi to be there, and he approached her to greet her.

Young-mi huffed, letting out an annoyed snort. There had never been a time when she had disliked her son as much as now. But no matter how much she disliked him, she couldn’t avoid the procedure.

The test results were important to Young-mi. It was a big deal whether the child was his or not.

“So, did the results come out?”

“It’s time. I’ll go check.”

After confirming the time in response to Young-mi's question, Jiheon trudged to the research facility's office, accompanied by the secretary who had been standing beside Jaekwang.

In the quiet that followed, Young-mi asked Jaekwang, "What are you doing here?"

It annoyed her that the man she hardly saw at home had made time to come here because of a child whose paternity was uncertain.

"I just stopped by while passing through."

Jaekwang turned his face away, looking fearful of Young-mi's nagging. Fortunately, Jiheon returned soon, interrupting their conversation.

"What are the results?"

Young-mi rushed over and snatched the result paper from Jiheon's hand.

The result sheet stated, just like before, "No possibility of paternity." Upon confirming the results, Young-mi's eyes sparkled with a mix of disbelief and realization.

"It came out as a genetic mismatch. He's not the father."

"See? What did I tell you!"

When the initial result was claimed to be wrong, she had been filled with doubt but also wanted to believe her son. However, now that the second result also showed no possibility of paternity, she was furious.

"Where are the kid and the mother? Did they run away out of fear? How can this ridiculous situation happen?"

Young-mi's voice grew louder. Jiheon and Jaekwang looked displeased.

Jiheon asked Jaekwang, "What do you think, Father?"

"It's complicated."

Young-mi was even more appalled by Jaekwang's nonchalant response.

"Complicated? This is just complicated for you? I'm furious. Just thinking about how Jiheon was toyed with by that mother and child."

"Mom."

"They're just using you! Making both you and your father waste your time like this! I can't just let this go. I'm going to sue them for fraud."

"Hey, dear. Jiheon's mom!"

Jaekwang raised his voice as he tried to calm the agitated Young-mi. Young-mi looked at Jaekwang.

Jaekwang spoke.

"That was my test."

"What… what do you mean?"

"It was the genetic test between me and Jiheon."

Young-mi's eyes widened in shock.

"My paternity test with Jiheon came out like that. It says Jiheon isn't my biological son."

"What do you mean, what… what?"

Young-mi was stunned, unable to comprehend what Jaekwang was saying. It felt as if he was insulting her.

"What nonsense are you talking about? If he's not your son, then whose son is he?"

She felt wronged and incredulous. Jaekwang was saying that Jeong-o was a fraud, but why was the fallout landing on her? She couldn't understand why she was being blamed for something so absurd.

“I swear on my life! I swear on my life!”

Tears welled up from the sheer absurdity of the situation. Young-mi, disregarding her dignity, confronted Jaekwang.

“I have lived only looking at our Jiheon’s face all these years. How could you do this to me? What? What kind of test are you talking about?”

“That’s what I’m saying, dear.”

Jaekwang calmly tried to console Young-mi.

“Do you think I can’t trust you? Do you think I would doubt Jiheon?”

“…….”

“Isn’t Jiheon getting this test because you don’t believe him?”

Young-mi’s eyes were still anxiously darting around, unable to grasp the meaning behind Jaekwang’s words.

“Both the paternity test you requested and the one between Jiheon and me are wrong. Someone must have switched the blood or tampered with the results; the tests have been contaminated in some way.”

“Wh-what do you mean, who?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to investigate thoroughly to find out who did this.”

Young-mi’s mouth fell open in disbelief.

Jiheon looked at Young-mi with indifference.

He had intentionally found a research facility where Chae Eun-yeob could easily access it. While pretending to maintain strict security, he leaked various information, ensuring it reached Eun-yeob.

As expected, whether through some channel, Eun-yeob had succeeded again in tampering with the test results. Jiheon thought it was fortunate that Eun-yeob had succeeded this time. Only by confirming that the paternity results for both his father and himself were manipulated would both his father and mother be convinced.

How do you feel now, Mother?

Despite feeling indignant at Jiheon for deceiving her, Young-mi glared at him but couldn't say a word, her hands trembling with anger.

"Still, don't worry too much. Our Jiheon had another test done anonymously. Jiheon, what were the results of the other test?"

Jaekwang asked Jiheon. This moment felt even more intense for Jaekwang than before.

Jiheon had asked the secretary to conduct another test. He had anonymously requested a paternity test using hair samples from Jaekwang, Jiheon, and Yena.

Jiheon received the envelope containing the results from Jaekwang's secretary and opened it.

"This one came back clear."

Once again, Young-mi snatched the result sheet from him.

On the first page of the result, the bold print stated, "Paternity Probability = 99.999%." Young-mi let out a deep, incredulous sigh. She insisted stubbornly.

"You believe this? This result can be manipulated just like the others!"

"That's why we conducted three tests across three generations. The tests were supervised by your father's secretary."

Jaekwang's secretary had been with him for over twenty years.

“This result states that I am my father’s biological son and that Yena is my biological daughter.”

Jiheon was careful, adding his father’s test to enhance the credibility of the results.

“Which result do you believe, Mother? The one stating I’m not my father’s son, or the one stating I am?”

It felt as if Chae Eun-yeob was watching from somewhere.

Eun-yeob, you must have gone all-in on the second test. You probably thought that if the second test also showed I wasn’t the child, I would give up.

You overlooked something. I’m much more tenacious than you, perhaps even more than you realize.

No matter how many of my paternity tests you ruin, I’m ready to retake them as many times as it takes.

Jaekwang pressed his lips into a thin line, while Young-mi, unable to contain her fury, glared at Jiheon. Jaekwang was the first to speak.

“Jiheon, what about the other results?”

“They’re in.”

Jiheon turned to look at the entrance of the research facility and smiled brightly.

He saw Jeong-o and Yena approaching.

“Dad!”

Yena ran over to Jiheon, who picked her up in an instant.

Following behind, Jeong-o pulled out the results from the envelope and handed them to Jiheon.

“This is the paternity test result.”

This time it was the blood test results from a different institution for Yena and Jiheon.

Once again, the results were the same.

— Client A (Jeong Jiheon) and Client B (Lee Yena) are recognized as biological parent and child with a probability of 99.999%.

Jiheon handed the result to Jaekwang.

Young-mi couldn’t bring herself to snatch the result this time; she stole a glance to check the results. The clearly printed red letters were the first thing that caught her eye.

And there stood Jeong-o before her.

The child she hadn’t seen for seven years was no longer the innocent, simple-looking kid from seven years ago. Seeing Jeong-o confidently meeting her gaze without flinching made Young-mi’s knees go weak.

Jeong-o greeted her first.

“Hello, ma’am.”

“What?”

“…….”

“Do you think I’m going to be nice to you?”

You come back and hit me with this?

You haven’t said a word in seven years, and now you show up? Now that my son has reached marriageable age?

Young-mi’s fists were clenched tightly, digging into her palms. Unable to contain her anger, she left the building first.

Jaekwang, watching this scene with a heavy heart, apologized.

“I apologize. My wife is a bit sensitive.”

Jeong-o greeted Jaekwang politely, maintaining an unfazed expression.

“Good afternoon, Chairman.”

“Just call me casually.”

“…….”

“We finally meet.”

Finally, we can meet.

Jaekwang extended his hand for a handshake. Jeong-o hesitated for a moment before taking Jaekwang’s outstretched hand. The warmth of his body temperature was conveyed. Jeong-o’s nervousness eased slightly at Jaekwang’s smile.

Jiheon resembles his father more than his mother.

“I’m sorry for all the difficulties you’ve had to go through.”

Jaekwang briefly apologized and turned his head. He didn’t linger his gaze on Jeong-o for long. The main reason Jaekwang was here at this moment was elsewhere.

He wanted to turn the child, who was only looking at her father in his arms, not caring whether her grandfather was there or not.

“Hello, Yena! It’s your grandfather!”

Jaekwang greeted her boisterously.

How long he had wanted to say this!

Yena turned her head to look at Jaekwang. Jiheon set Yena down from his arms.

Jaekwang bent down to meet Yena’s eyes and gently took her hand.

“I’m your grandfather. I’m your grandfather!”

Ch91 - Mother and Mother

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Jaekwang said to Yena,

“I’m your grandfather. I’m your dad’s dad. Got it?”

“Uh, but…”

Yena hesitated as if deep in thought and called out to her mother, “Mom, isn’t this the grandfather who was standing in front of the academy on Monday?”

The title “this grandfather” surprised Jeong-o, who quickly ran over and covered Yena’s mouth.

Jaekwang was also taken aback by the child’s words. The child was sharp.

Jeong-o made an awkward expression, but Jaekwang laughed heartily.

She’s really smart. She must be my granddaughter.

“That’s right. Grandpa came to visit.”

While Grandpa’s heart was immensely pleased, Jiheon’s expression was quite the opposite.

“Father, did you go to see Yena? All the way to the academy?”

He was displeased that his father had stubbornly sought out Yena’s academy.

His father was reckless. What if the child got scared?

“I didn’t go inside the academy; I just saw her from in front of the building.”

“You just happened to pass by?”

“Yeah. I just ran into her.”

His father’s answer sounded like an excuse. Jiheon was well aware of his family’s tendencies. They would casually lie for personal gain. That was the main difference from Jeong-o’s family.

Jaekwang felt wronged in his own way, and his voice rose a bit.

“I didn’t pretend to know her or talk to her.”

I just looked at her. Just looked!

But Jiheon’s expression was so fierce that Jaekwang felt the need to retreat.

“I should get going. I’m really busy.”

He truly was busy. Today, he had taken time out of his hectic schedule just to see the child.

“We’ll be able to meet again soon, right?”

Having given up on his son, Jaekwang kindly greeted Jeong-o in hopes of getting closer to his grandchild and affectionately patted Yena.

“Yena, see you again. Do you remember me?”

It was still hard for him to show warmth towards his son.

“Don’t make us wait too long; move things along quickly.”

He responded warmly to his prospective daughter-in-law, gently to his grandchild, and sternly to his son. After Jaekwang left, Jiheon observed

Jeong-o’s expression.

“My father isn’t normally like that. He’s really a scary person.”

For some reason, Jiheon felt a twinge of malice at the way Jeong-o looked at Jaekwang with admiration.

“He smiled like a nice uncle as he left, but he probably did a thorough background check on both Jeong-o and Yena. That’s why he went all the way to the academy.”

“…….”

“So don’t trust him too much. Don’t get too attached.”

“You’re talking about your father as if he were a stranger.”

“My father isn’t a family-oriented person. In 33 years, I’ve barely met him.”

Jeong-o recalled what Jiheon had said seven years ago. Jiheon had said something similar then too. It was strange that even though she had lost her memories, her feelings about her father remained the same as Yena’s now.

“But you should be grateful. He trusted your brother and willingly cooperated with that ridiculous paternity test.”

“That’s true.”

Jiheon reluctantly agreed with Jeong-o’s opinion.

Eun-yeob was waiting for a call from the genetic research institute. The call from the staff came quite late. The staff member spoke with a somewhat anxious voice about what had happened in the meantime.

[As you instructed, we did everything. The client’s name was Jeong Ji-heon, and the other person being tested was anonymous. So, we perfectly switched the anonymous client’s blood, just as you said. I succeeded, but it

seems they conducted another test on their end. That test came back as a biological relationship.]

“Another test?”

[The client had someone else conduct another paternity test. They took advantage of the fact that paternity tests can also be done anonymously.]

Upon hearing the staff’s confession, Eun-yeob shouted,

“You should have watched closely and stopped it!”

[You requested the test anonymously, so how would you know or have the means to stop it? Do you think names are written on hair?] The staff member began to argue with Eun-yeob instead. Eun-yeob pressed his forehead in frustration.

He hadn’t anticipated Jeong Ji-heon would react this way. He thought that if the second test failed, there would be a third attempt at most. He hadn’t expected a third party to be involved in a task that needed to be conducted in secrecy.

Given Eun-yeob’s distrust of others, he couldn’t comprehend Jiheon’s feelings. He assumed that Jiheon’s feelings for Jeong-o were shallow.

There was one major misconception Eun-yeob had been harboring. He assumed that Jeong-o had approached Jiheon first. That premise was fundamentally wrong. Eun-yeob hadn’t realized that Jiheon was obsessively clinging to Jeong-o.

The Jiheon that Cha Eun-yeob had seen was someone who couldn’t maintain close relationships with anyone, wouldn’t give anyone a chance, didn’t reveal his true feelings, regarded everyone else as insignificant, and only cared about his own pride. At least, that was how he had been for the past seven years.

He hadn’t expected this cold-hearted person, whose very blood felt icy, to passionately defend someone so vigorously.

He also hadn’t thought that he would sincerely cherish a child who seemed to have dropped from the sky after seven years of absence. It was a fundamental miscalculation.

[Can you imagine how much trouble this has caused me? The client filed a claim saying the test was incorrect. Anyway, I did what you asked, so you need to help me with my divorce case as promised. I look forward to it.]

After finishing his words, the staff hung up first. The work had failed, and now he had to deal with the difficult aftermath. It was a complete defeat for Eun-yeob.

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After parting with Jaekwang, the three of them went to Guksun’s restaurant for an early dinner. Jiheon had to return to the office for overtime, so Guksun set the table early. Yena sat on Jiheon’s lap again this time.

While Yena was eating side dishes like a baby bird, she asked,

“But if Mom is Mom and Dad is Dad, aren’t Mom and Dad a couple?”

Jiheon replied,

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because we haven’t gotten married yet.”

“Why haven’t you?”

“Because there’s no time. But we will soon.”

Jiheon felt good that his daughter was expressing what he wanted.

“When do you want Mom and Dad to get married?”

“On Saturday.”

“Why Saturday?”

“Because it’s a day when Yena doesn’t go to daycare or the academy.”

Jiheon smiled contentedly, while Jeong-o let out a deep sigh.

“Yena, marriage isn’t something that can just happen in a few days. When you get married later, if you try to rush through it, I’ll tell you that it’s not okay. Marriage can’t be done carelessly, understood?”

“Okay.”

Whether she understood or just responded, Yena’s answer was simply cheerful.

“First, we’ll file for marriage registration. Let’s do it tomorrow. We’ll sort everything else out one by one.”

Now that marriage was on the table, Jiheon also began discussing the next steps.

“First, the house issue is the most urgent. If we’re going to live together, we need to move to a bigger place. For now, I’d like us all to live together. How about that?”

“I think Mom might feel burdened by the height.”

Jeong-o spoke in a cautious tone. Yena cheerfully chimed in again,

“Then Dad can come to our house!”

“Should we do that?”

Jiheon agreed. Guksun, who had come out of the kitchen, spoke bluntly. It turned out she had been listening to their conversation.

“Why would Dad live there? He has a big house.”

“Mother, I’m fine. I can live anywhere, anytime.”

“But still, take your time to prepare. Our house is too small. It only has one bathroom, so it would be inconvenient.”

Guksun’s advice was sharp.

“Set some rules. Until we move to a new place, let’s live as we have been. That would be comfortable for both you and me.”

With Guksun’s rules, the situation was quickly organized.

Of course, even if Jiheon were to live immediately with Jeong-o and Yena, neither Guksun nor Jeong-o nor Yena would feel much discomfort. It would just mean adding one more spoon to the table.

However, for Jiheon, who had lived without any shortcomings, it could feel overwhelming.

A cramped room to lie down in, belongings cluttering the floor, and a single bathroom… He had never experienced any of that. Guksun had spoken harshly to consider Jiheon’s perspective.

As Jiheon’s daughter was getting married, her mother felt anxious. Since they couldn’t meet Jiheon’s family circumstances, the dowry and wedding gifts wouldn’t satisfy their expectations. Guksun felt increasingly sorry for her daughter.

After dinner, when Yena said she needed to go to the bathroom, Jeong-o took her outside the restaurant, and Guksun said to Jiheon,

“You can take Jeong-o and Yena with you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yena, Dad’s house is spacious, right? It would be nice for us to take Jeong-o and Yena and spend some cozy time together.”

“Mother, if you say that…”

“Your family is the real one. I was the temporary family.”

Guksun’s voice, yielding happiness, was firm. Yet, an unavoidable loneliness seeped through. To conceal her true feelings, Guksun forced a smile and said to Jiheon,

“I couldn’t raise you that way, so I hoped at least our Jeong-o or the child she has would have a complete family. Now that dream has finally come true.”

“It’s not a temporary family, Mother.”

Jiheon replied politely.

“Before getting close to Jeong-o, she once said, ‘Mom and I are soulmates.’”

“……”

“You’ve probably been Jeong-o’s closest friend for a long time. You must have been her only support.”

If he confessed that he had never felt the love of a complete family, would she believe him?

If he told her that the family he wanted to emulate, the one he wished to seep into, was entirely shown by her, would she feel pity for him?

Jiheon felt a little ashamed, thinking that his heart and his family’s heart were so dry and poor.

“That will probably continue to be the case. Jeong-o will.”

“……”

“It’ll be the same for me from now on.”

Guksun’s eyes, which had always maintained a cool demeanor, began to warm up with moisture.

“You need to stay by my side, Mother.”

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The next morning.

As usual, Jiheon stopped by Jeong-o's house to drop off Yena and then went to work with Jeong-o.

Having been apart overnight, Yena spoiled Jiheon with affection before getting on the daycare bus. It was a day that began with emotion and excitement. Upon arriving at the office, Jiheon greeted his secretary in a good mood.

"Good morning!"

However, the secretary's expression was not very bright.

"Director, your wife is waiting for you."

Young-mi was waiting for Jiheon in his office. Jiheon opened the office door with a stiff expression.

"What brings you here again?"

With a cool greeting, Young-mi looked at Jiheon with eyes full of resentment. But then, she sighed as if resigned.

"Mom has been worrying all night."

Young-mi's eyes were moist. However, Jiheon didn't find that gaze warm like Guksun's.

As expected, Young-mi's resolve was severe.

"Just bring the child. I'll take care of her. She'll receive a good education and live comfortably without envy. I will make sure of that."

"Mother."

“I can’t allow you to be tied to that family. Even Cinderella has her standards.”

Young-mi’s voice rose as if bursting with indignation. But they were in Jiheon’s company, so considering appearances, she quickly lowered her voice.

“I can’t just marry you off like that, as if you were cheap merchandise. I absolutely can’t do that.”

Yet that cold assertion remained.

“It’s all because I care about you. It’s because I love you. Someday, you’ll understand your mother’s feelings. You’ll see how much it tears my heart apart.”

For the first time in a long while, Jiheon faced his mother’s tears.

Ch92 - We Wanted to Protect Mr. Gi-hun

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Once again, Jiheon's heart ached at his mother's tears. But he firmly closed his heart.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

Suppressing his swirling emotions, Jiheon handed Young-mi a tissue and urged her.

"Absolutely don't go looking for Yena or Jeong-o. Not even for Jeong-o's mother. If you go looking for those three, I'll never see you again."

With that sharp warning, Jiheon opened the office door immediately.

"It's uncomfortable for you to visit suddenly during working hours. I have my own schedule too. If you have something to say, please call me first."

"Why have you become so cold?"

Young-mi's voice made Jiheon close the half-open door again.

The sound of her son approaching felt strangely sharp. Young-mi's eyes widened, as if she were facing someone other than her son. This was a side of him she didn't recognize.

From a mother's perspective, it seemed her son had changed due to the wrong woman he had met. Young-mi wanted to blame everything on Jeong-o.

“You say you won’t see your mother? You never said that before. Why are you like this? What has changed?”

“I haven’t changed. I’m saying this because I love you.”

Jiheon replied in an eerily cold voice. It felt as if he had confirmed the terrifying underside of the word “love.”

“I’m telling you in advance because I care. I want us to get along without friction.”

Only then did Young-mi realize. The declarations of love she had received like gifts from her son had been empty boxes.

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After sending Young-mi away, Jiheon immediately went to find Jeong-o. He was anxious that Young-mi might change direction and head to Jeong-o. He needed to protect Jeong-o.

Fortunately, it seemed Young-mi had left the company safely, and Jeong-o was alone in the meeting room.

As Jiheon approached and sat beside Jeong-o, staring at her, she asked,

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

He felt embarrassed. He couldn’t bring himself to speak.

Your mother had welcomed me so warmly, but I couldn’t repay that warmth. I felt sorry and ashamed.

“My mother might come looking for me.”

“I’m fine with that.”

At Jeong-o’s calmly stated words, Jiheon nodded cautiously.

“If she bothers Yena, I won’t just stand by. My mom feels the same way. But I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

Was that the concern? Seeing Jiheon’s heavy expression, Jeong-o also felt worried for him. As she thought of a topic that could lift his spirits, she suddenly had a good idea.

“It would be nice for Yena to have her dad around and live together… but it can’t be helped. That’s the only way.”

“What way?”

“I hope you’ll be careful. Don’t let Yena get too attached.”

“What?”

“We might live together, but there’s also a chance we can’t. We never know what might happen. So please, don’t let Yena fall too hard for you.”

Indeed, her cold words prompted an immediate reaction from him. He furrowed his brows and glared at her.

“We’ve been doing fine so far. In the worst-case scenario, we should be careful so that everyone can return to how things were without getting hurt, right? You can’t tell Yena not to develop feelings for her dad. She’s just a kid. So you have to be careful.”

“So, you want me to tell Yena not to have feelings for me?”

“I’m just asking you to be cautious. Don’t let Yena get too ‘dad-dad’ about you.”

Jiheon’s eyes narrowed slightly. With a smirk, Jiheon raised an eyebrow and asked Jeong-o,

“Let’s be honest.”

“……”

“Honestly, you’re feeling insecure right now, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re worried that I might get closer to Yena than you, aren’t you?”

“Hah. That’s funny. What are you saying?”

“Are you jealous of me, jealous of Yena? Which one is it? Or both?”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Look at that. Your expression is really awkward right now.”

“That’s because it’s so absurd. So absurd.”

Jeong-o, who had pretended to be nonchalant, couldn’t keep up the act and burst out laughing.

Only after seeing Jeong-o laugh did Jiheon realize that the ice-cold heart he had been holding onto had melted away.

He had come to protect her, but instead, he felt comforted again.

You remind me that it’s possible to face the world’s many worries with a smile. You show me where I’m meant to be.

How have I lived all this time without you? Now, I can’t go back to a time without you.

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Eun-joo, looking for something to say to Jeong-o, wandered around and discovered Jiheon and Jeong-o sitting side by side in the meeting room. She turned around.

“You came back quickly.”

Gi-hun spoke up. He had gone to find Jeong-o but returned to his seat almost immediately.

Please understand, Eun-joo thought as she replied to Gi-hun.

“Yeah. I saw Director Jeong in the meeting room.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Director Jeong and Assistant Lee are alone.”

“Alone?”

However, Gi-hun didn’t grasp Eun-joo’s intention. For some reason, the assistant Park Young-gwang beside him flinched.

Gi-hun, with an innocent expression, suddenly stood up with his laptop.

“Where are you going?”

“To the meeting room. Assistant Lee is supposed to be there.”

He was determined to protect Jeong-o from Director Jeong. Gi-hun’s pure soul, burning with loyalty and chivalry, strode toward the meeting room.

“No, no, no, Gi-hun…”

Young-gwang hurriedly reached out, trying to stop Gi-hun, but it was no use. A young man in love couldn’t be stopped by anyone.

Eun-joo smiled bitterly.

Well, it wouldn’t be so bad if he figured it out on his own.

Whether they fought over a woman or not, it was none of my business. It wouldn’t be bad to see it to the end.

No matter how great Director Jeong is, he can’t easily win against the impulsiveness of youth. Gi-hun is six years younger, after all. If Gi-hun

charges in, Director Jeong will be a bit nervous.

If a fight is going to happen, I hope Gi-hun wins.

“Sigh.”

Eun-joo sorted out her feelings and returned to her work, but she kept hearing sighs from beside her. Eun-joo pushed her chair back and asked Young-gwang,

“Assistant Manager, what’s wrong?”

“Huh? Nothing.”

“……”

“Assistant Ko, I don’t have two lives, nor am I brave. I just want to live a long, thin life. I want to do this job for a long time.”

Though he had said nothing was wrong, Young-gwang quickly added,

“There are times when you have to act as if you haven’t seen something or that you don’t exist. That position is a bit painful.”

“……”

“Our Gi-hun should realize that soon.”

Ah, the deputy director knows about the relationship between Director Jeong and Deputy Lee.

Well, given that Director Jeong Ji-hun is being so obvious about it and they even went on a business trip together, it’s hard not to know.

Earlier, I was cheering for Gi-hoon, but now I feel a bit sorry for him. Just as Eun-joo was about to get back to work, she hesitated.

‘Wait, what if Song Gi-hoon and Jeong Ji-hun have a showdown?’

I might be rooting for Song Gi-hoon, but Deputy Lee Jeong-oh is tied to Jeong Ji-hun!

What if Song Gi-hoon quits the company? That would all fall on me!

Oh no. I really didn’t want this to happen!

Eun-joo quickly pushed her chair away and stood up.

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In the conference room.

Gi-hoon opened the door and peeked his face inside.

“Deputy!”

“Oh, Gi-hoon.”

Jeong-oh smiled, and Ji-hun’s expression, which had been smiling, instantly hardened.

“Oh, Director, you’re here too. Hello.”

Whether he was unaware or pretending not to be, Gi-hoon greeted them cheerfully and took a seat in the conference room.

“Were you two having a conversation?”

In response to Gi-hoon’s question, Ji-hun answered relatively kindly.

“We were discussing the filming of the Dawan liquor advertisement. We said that you worked really hard.”

Personally, he wanted to snap back and ask what Gi-hoon was doing interfering, but as the head of the department, he maintained a benevolent demeanor.

“No, no. Every time I was about to doze off, Deputy Lee kept me entertained with his interesting comments.”

“Still, it must have been tough driving back and forth.”

“No, it wasn’t too bad. Ah, I did take a quick nap in between. Where did we sleep, Deputy?”

Gi-hoon’s provocation made Ji-hun’s eyes flash. In truth, Gi-hoon didn’t intend to provoke him. It was a genuinely innocent reply.

“At the rest area, you napped for about 5 minutes, and I was outside getting some fresh air and drinking coffee.”

Feeling the need to justify himself, Jeong-oh hastily added extra details. Despite that, Ji-hun’s expression didn’t soften. Ji-hun then asked an unexpected question in a quietly sharp voice.

“Song Gi-hoon, do you keep secrets well? Are you a tight-lipped person?”

“Yes, I tend to be that way.”

Although surprised by Ji-hun’s question, Gi-hoon answered without showing any other emotions. He didn’t dwell on it long because Gi-hoon’s purpose was to protect Jeong-oh, so he bravely spoke to her.

“Deputy, I have something to ask. Should I wait outside?”

“No, it’s fine. We’re done talking, right, Director?”

Ji-hun looked between the two before waving his hand slightly. He signaled for them to talk. Ji-hun seemed to be somewhat sulky, which made Jeong-oh a bit concerned. However, she couldn’t ignore Gi-hoon, who had something to ask. Jeong-oh told Gi-hoon,

“Go ahead.”

“It’s about the hair loss prevention shampoo advertisement. I don’t understand the advertiser’s intent. Keeping the hair you have is different

from stimulating hair growth in places where there is none.”

“What did the advertiser say?”

“Could you check the email that the AE sent? But the wording is a bit rough. You should keep that in mind.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay.”

While Gi-hoon showed Jeong-oh the laptop screen and talked about the details, Ji-hun sat still, quietly observing them. Even though he was staring hard at them, they continued their conversation as if in their own world.

Ji-hun’s fists clenched tightly.

Is that guy trying to keep me in check, or is he just clueless? Doubts began to arise gradually.

Somehow it feels like he’s challenging me.

Ji-hun wiggled his fingers as he measured the time. Their conversation continued.

“By the way, the rumor that thinking about dirty things makes your hair grow faster is all nonsense. If that were true, I would be Rapunzel.”

“Pfft.”

“It sounds like a joke, but it’s true.”

“You’re such an innocent young man, Gi-hoon.”

“Well, I have to manage my image a bit in front of the Deputy.”

I can’t take this anymore!

As Ji-hun’s irritation boiled over and he clenched his fist, Jeong-oh’s phone vibrated.

“Hold on, it’s a call from the planning team’s manager. Yes, manager.”

Jeong-oh answered the phone. In the now quiet conference room, the voice of the planning team manager echoed from Jeong-oh’s phone.

[Lee Jeong-oh, can you tell me about one spelling error?]

“Yes, go ahead.”

Gi-hoon let out a slight laugh at the manager’s voice. Reaching his limit, Ji-hun could no longer stand the sight and intervened.

“Song Gi-hoon. Be a bit more careful.”

“…What?”

“Stop acting like a fox.”

“……”

“Tell Deputy Lee Jeong-oh to stop bothering her.”

“Director!”

As Jeong-oh hung up the phone in shock, the door suddenly burst open, and Eun-joo entered.

But by then, the damage was already done.

Jeong-oh, Gi-hoon, and Eun-joo all had faces as red as tomatoes from the same farm, while Ji-hun, the one who had spilled the beans, wore a calm expression like a still lake. Jeong-oh was astounded by Ji-hun’s shameless demeanor.

Jeong Ji-hun, are you really out of your mind?

Ch93 - Both Sides

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While everyone was frozen in shock, Eun-joo was the first to regain her composure and shouted.

“Deputy! We’ve been looking for you! What are you doing here!”

Eun-joo quickly organized Jeong-oh’s laptop as she shouted.

“Come on, let’s hurry up and go! Gi-hoon, get ready quickly! We have a meeting!”

Jeong-oh had never seen Eun-joo, usually so poised and graceful, move so swiftly to gather her things.

For a moment, he was speechless, but Eun-joo’s quick response snapped him back to reality. He felt that he couldn’t leave Gi-hoon and Ji-hun alone like this. Ji-hun was no concern, but the innocent Gi-hoon was worrisome. He needed to separate the two as soon as possible.

Gi-hoon, whose brain was still reeling from Ji-hun’s reckless words, remained dazed as Eun-joo pulled him out of the conference room. Jeong-oh shot Ji-hun a sharp glance before leaving the meeting room.

As he stepped out, he checked on Gi-hoon. Gi-hoon’s face was as red as one molded from pink clay, not just his cheeks but also his ears and neck.

Seeing such a reaction, it was clear that Gi-hoon had heard everything Ji-hun said, but how to handle it now?

“Gi-hoon…”

Just as Jeong-oh cautiously reached out to Gi-hoon, another voice called out to him from across the room.

“Deputy Lee Jeong-oh!”

The planning team’s team leader had rushed over with the head of the team, looking for Jeong-oh.

“Deputy Lee, we need your help! Come quickly!”

“Uh? What’s going on?”

“The client is calling for us, and you’re the only one who can handle it with quick thinking!”

“W-wait! I have a meeting to attend!”

Jeong-oh exclaimed as he was hurried away by the AE from the planning team, who grabbed his shoulders.

“It’s okay. Go ahead, Deputy!”

Eun-joo said to Jeong-oh. In fact, there was no urgent meeting at all; it was just an excuse to get Jeong-oh and Gi-hoon out of the conference room. It was fortunate that the planning team arrived just in time to take Jeong-oh away.

Once Jeong-oh was swept away like someone caught in a crowded subway entrance, Eun-joo sighed quietly.

Gi-hoon still wore a blank expression, tightly shutting his mouth. Eun-joo began to notice a side of Gi-hoon she had never seen before.

As Gi-hoon was about to quietly sit down, he suddenly flinched. He saw Ji-hun walking gracefully down the hallway behind Eun-joo. Ji-hun was also leaving the conference room, returning to his office.

“Gi-hoon, hang in there. You can overcome this! Let’s get back to work and focus!”

Eun-joo silently sent a telepathic message of encouragement, though she couldn’t bring herself to say it directly.

However, Gi-hoon, who had been silently sitting and clenching and unclenching his fists, ultimately stood up.

“Gi-hoon, where are you going…?”

Eun-joo called out desperately, but Gi-hoon didn’t respond. She helplessly watched as his youthful determination led him toward Ji-hun’s office.

Gi-hoon knocked confidently on Ji-hun’s office door and entered.

“Director.”

Ji-hun, who was about to sit down, turned his back against the executive desk and looked at Gi-hoon. Just staring silently was enough to make Gi-hoon feel pressured. But he steeled himself and bravely spoke up.

“Director, what did you mean by what you said earlier?”

“I thought you, Song Gi-hoon, would understand.”

As expected, Ji-hun responded clearly without getting flustered or agitated. When Gi-hoon hesitated and didn’t respond, Ji-hun skillfully pressed on.

“Or did I mistakenly pick on someone who isn’t aware?”

“……”

“Are you certain you can guarantee that you have no feelings for Deputy Lee Jeong-oh? Then I’ll apologize.”

Having no intention of hiding anymore, Ji-hun asked pointedly, as if he could read Gi-hoon’s mind. Gi-hoon’s expression changed first, suddenly realizing something.

Director Jeong Ji-hun likes Deputy Lee Jeong-oh too.

But that couldn’t be a reason. Unless he was directly involved, Ji-hun couldn’t give him such advice.

“…But I don’t understand why I should hear such things from you.”

After a moment of silence, Gi-hoon replied.

“Why are you saying that? It’s between me and Deputy Lee Jeong-oh.”

“……”

“Just because you have feelings for Deputy Lee Jeong-oh doesn’t mean you can control my words or actions.”

“Not at all.”

Ji-hun decisively countered Gi-hoon’s argument. Gi-hoon flinched again at that boldness, feeling as if he were being overpowered by Ji-hun.

“If you control my words and actions, then I…”

“That’s not it; I’m saying it’s not one-sided.”

Thinking Gi-hoon had misunderstood, Ji-hun clarified. What he was pointing out wasn’t Gi-hoon’s words or actions, but rather that his feelings for Lee Jeong-oh weren’t one-sided.

Gi-hoon stared at Ji-hun in shock, his eyes widening. As he opened them wider, Ji-hun’s handsome idol-like features shone even brighter. Ji-hun’s competitive spirit surged.

I have to make him realize this; a man’s instincts sent a sharp warning to Ji-hun.

“…If it’s not one-sided…”

“Both sides.”

“……”

“Does that answer your question?”

In the midst of everyone being frozen, Eun-joo, the first to regain her senses, shouted.

“Deputy! We’ve been looking everywhere! What are you doing here!”

As she organized Jeong-oh’s laptop, she continued to shout.

“Come on, let’s hurry up and get ready! Gi-hun, you too! Let’s have a meeting!”

Seeing the other party waiting ahead, the princess of the world, who never ran, was packing up with such agility that Jeong-oh had never witnessed before.

Momentarily at a loss for words, Jeong-oh also snapped back to reality thanks to Eun-joo’s quick response. He felt he couldn’t leave Gi-hun and Ji-heon alone like this. Ji-heon was no worry, but he was concerned about the innocent young Gi-hun. He decided he needed to separate the two quickly.

Stunned by Ji-heon’s hurtful words, Gi-hun remained in a daze as Eun-joo pulled him out of the meeting room. Jeong-oh shot a sharp glance at Ji-heon before leaving the meeting room.

As they exited the meeting room, Jeong-oh checked on Gi-hun’s condition. His face was as red as a person sculpted from pink clay, not just his face but also his ears and neck.

Judging by his reaction, it seemed he had heard everything Ji-heon said, but how could this be handled?

“Gi-hun…”

Just as Jeong-oh cautiously reached out to him.

“Lee Jeong-oh!”

Another voice calling Jeong-oh from the opposite side interrupted them. The deputy team leader from the planning team had rushed in with the team leader.

“Lee, we need your help! Hurry, come on!”

“Uh? What’s going on?”

“The client is calling for us, and we need someone who can think on their feet, and that someone is you!”

“Uh, uh, uh! But I have a meeting!”

As Jeong-oh was being pulled away by the AE from the planning team, he shouted in a fluster.

“It’s okay. Just go, Deputy.”

Eun-joo said to Jeong-oh. In truth, there was no urgent meeting; it was just an excuse to get Jeong-oh and Gi-hun out of the meeting room. It was fortunate that the planning team came to take Jeong-oh away at that moment.

After Jeong-oh was swept away like someone waiting at the entrance of a crowded subway station, Eun-joo let out a quiet sigh.

Gi-hun was still sitting there with a blank expression, keeping his mouth tightly shut. Eun-joo began to notice Gi-hun’s uncharacteristically anxious demeanor.

Just as Gi-hun was about to quietly sit down, he flinched. He spotted Director Jeong Ji-heon sauntering down the hallway behind Eun-joo. Ji-heon was also leaving the meeting room and heading back to his office.

“Gi-hun, hang in there. You can do this! Let’s get back to work!”

Eun-joo couldn’t bring herself to say it directly, so she sent supportive telepathy from her seat.

However, despite quietly sitting and opening and closing his fists, Gi-hun eventually stood up abruptly.

“Gi-hun, where are you going…?”

Eun-joo called out sorrowfully, but Gi-hun didn’t answer. She watched in despair as youthful vigor led him towards Director Jeong Ji-heon’s office.

Gi-hun confidently knocked on the door of Ji-heon’s office and stepped inside.

“Director.”

Ji-heon, who had turned his back while about to sit, leaned against the executive desk and looked at Gi-hun. Just by looking silently, Gi-hun felt overwhelmed by his aura. Yet he steeled himself and bravely spoke.

“Director, what did you mean by what you said earlier?”

“I thought you would understand, Song Gi-hun.”

Ji-heon replied steadily, not at all flustered or agitated. Gi-hun hesitated, unable to respond, prompting Ji-heon to skillfully continue.

“Did I catch you off guard?”

“…”

“I can assure you that I didn’t have even the slightest feeling for Lee Jeong-oh as a woman. If that’s the case, I’ll apologize.”

Having no intention of hiding any longer, Ji-heon spoke directly. When Ji-heon asked him pointedly, Gi-hun’s expression changed. Suddenly, he realized something.

Director Jeong Ji-heon likes Lee Jeong-oh too.

But that couldn’t be a reason. After all, it was one thing for him to feel that way as a party involved, but Ji-heon had no right to give him such advice.

“…But I don’t understand why I have to hear this from you, Director.”

After Gi-hun, whose feelings had been exposed, paused for a moment, he replied.

“Why are you saying this? It’s a matter between me and Lee Jeong-oh.”

“…”

“Just because you like Lee Jeong-oh unilaterally doesn’t mean you can control how I speak or act.”

“That’s not true.”

Ji-heon replied curtly to Gi-hun’s assertion. Gi-hun flinched again at the confidence in his response. It felt as if he was being overpowered by Ji-heon.

“If you can control my words and actions, then I…”

“No, I’m not being unilateral.”

Feeling that Gi-hun had misunderstood, Ji-heon clarified once more. What Ji-heon was emphasizing was not Gi-hun’s words or actions but that his feelings for Lee Jeong-oh weren’t one-sided.

Gi-hun stared wide-eyed at Ji-heon, shocked. As he opened his eyes wide, Ji-heon’s good-looking idol-like appearance shone even brighter. Ji-heon’s competitive spirit surged.

He had to make Gi-hun back down; a man’s instinct warned Ji-heon sharply.

“…If it’s not unilateral…”

“Then it’s mutual.”

“…”

“Is that answer sufficient?”

With Ji-heon’s uninterrupted response, Gi-hun’s eyes trembled. His heart collapsed.

“Gi-hun, you said you were tight-lipped, right?”

“…”

“I hope you keep this a secret.”

Ji-heon seemed to grant Gi-hun some time to collect himself, leaving the office first. He maintained a confident and relaxed demeanor until the end, making him appear even more cruel and sinister in Gi-hun’s eyes.

‘Why, Deputy? Why of all people… Why that guy…’

He didn’t have the black heart to pursue a relationship with Lee Jeong-oh. However, he respected Ji-heon so much, thought him too kind, and found him too pitiful, wanting to protect him.

He thought he was protecting him. Yet all that he had done was sabotage.

Thinking back, something always felt off about the two of them. Director Jeong Ji-heon sought out Lee Jeong-oh unusually often. Unlike other employees, they seemed to have spent quite a lot of time alone together.

Ji-heon’s decision to go on a business trip abroad was also when Lee Jeong-oh replaced Team Leader Seong Mi-ran for the overseas shoot.

The moments of doubt fell into place. Gi-hun felt like he wanted to crawl into a mouse hole.

“Gi-hun, what’s wrong with you?”

Seeing Gi-hun slump down in his seat, Deputy Park Young-gwang asked.

“Deputy.”

“…”

“I want to quit this company…”

Gi-hun replied in a voice completely devoid of spirit.

Afterward, Gi-hun remained unable to collect himself. This was the unfortunate situation that Eun-joo had feared. The youngest member of the team had lost his energy and couldn’t get any work done. The results he produced with his weak hands were all lifeless.

“Team Leader, Director Jeong Ji-heon is the best psycho I know. He must have come here to blow up this company.”

As soon as Eun-joo bumped into Mi-ran returning from the meeting, she vented her frustrations.

When Jeong-oh, who had been dragged away by the planning team, returned after finishing his work outside late in the afternoon, he heard the news that Gi-hun had lost his appetite. Feeling too worried, Jeong-oh packed a bowl of soup from a soup house and returned to the office.

Gi-hun was sitting alone in the break room. Mi-ran had sent him there because she saw no signs of recovery.

“Song Gi-hun…”

“Deputy.”

As Eun-joo cautiously approached, Gi-hun also called out to Jeong-oh.

“Were you dating Director Jeong Ji-heon?”

Gi-hun asked the person directly. Upon confirming with Jeong-oh’s trembling eyes, Gi-hun let out a bitter sigh.

“Who said that?”

“The director.”

“…”

“I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

After Gi-hun greeted her weakly and left, Jeong-oh muttered “Oh my God” as she exited the break room.

Returning to the team, she found Gi-hun sitting at his desk, weakly clicking the mouse. Eun-joo messaged Jeong-oh through the company messenger.

– Gi-hun just went to Director Jeong’s office alone a while ago. He’s been like this ever since.

Eun-joo secretly hoped that Ji-heon had been dumped decisively by Jeong-oh and sent a curse-laden report. Eun-joo’s curse had a partial effect. Jeong-oh clenched his fist and strode toward Ji-heon’s office.

A few hours earlier, as he walked through the hallway, Ji-heon had confirmed that Gi-hun was sitting blankly at his desk with a lost expression. Ji-heon felt no pangs of guilt.

Though he was the leader of the department, he couldn’t be a good person to everyone. For him, who had lived carelessly without being too invested in his work, the most important thing was always Lee Jeong-oh. His relationship with Jeong-oh was more important than his work.

Later, Jeong-oh, who had a slightly different stance than Ji-heon, came to find him in the late afternoon, fuming.

“Did you tell Song Gi-hun everything?”

Pfft. At her cute and ridiculous tone, Ji-heon couldn’t help but laugh. However, Jeong-oh was serious.

“This isn’t a joke!”

Grinding her teeth, Jeong-oh confronted Ji-heon.

“Sure, he would find out sooner or later, but you shouldn’t have said it like that. I should have told him myself, carefully!”

“Carefully when?”

As she came at him so earnestly, he couldn’t help but back down. It was a topic that needed to be addressed, and Ji-heon had to address it earnestly.

“You should have told him long ago.”

“When was there time to talk? Think about how busy we were.”

“When Ye-na was hospitalized, I called you, right? You should have mentioned it then.”

Ji-heon had his own grievances. It bothered him that the woman who had put up such a strong wall and was terrifying to him was so tender toward Gi-hun.

He let it go without bringing it up, fearing he might seem petty, but he had definitely hinted at it at some point.

He felt uncomfortable that Gi-hun knew more about her than he did.

Jeong-oh let out a sigh of resignation and asked, “At that time? Should I have told Song Gi-hun while driving?”

“Of course.”

“Should I have revealed that? At that time?”

“Absolutely. It was a good opportunity.”

“Opportunity? Ye-na collapsed. In that dark moment, I should have rambled on about our relationship to Song Gi-hun?”

Jeong-oh’s retort made Ji-heon’s brows furrow. While he understood her situation and circumstances, he didn’t want to easily admit it. He felt that he had gained Ye-na’s heart, but he still hadn’t won Jeong-oh’s heart.

He was also frustrated that he was still stuck in the emotional state of the villain.

How do we make progress?

In the midst of this, his phone buzzed. Ji-heon turned his head towards his phone. The screen illuminated, and he noticed a message from “Princess Ye-na.”

– I hope Dad comes to pick me up from the academy.

A short message containing the child’s wish to be picked up from the academy.

That brief sentence smoothed the lines on Ji-heon’s forehead. He immediately picked up his phone.

It was the first text message sent to him by his child. Ji-heon gazed at the sixteen characters sent by his child, engraving each letter in his heart. Each character brought waves of emotion.

Did she maintain proper spelling at the age of seven? She must be a copywriter’s daughter.

How long did it take her to send this?

Imagining that she had been fiddling with the phone screen with her small hand, he felt a flutter of excitement even amidst the serious moment. It felt like the child was playfully squeezing his heart.

“What’s this? Are you avoiding my question? Why are you smiling?”

Not yet aware of the situation, Jeong-oh glared at him, questioning him. Yet, a proud smile leaked from Ji-heon’s lips.

“Sorry.”

“Is saying sorry going to solve anything? What are you going to do now?”

Facing the furious Jeong-oh, Ji-heon leisurely put on his suit jacket.

“I’ll talk about it later. I have to step out for a bit.”

“No. You can’t. Finish this conversation first.”

Blocking Ji-heon’s path with a fierce expression, Jeong-oh stood her ground.

“I have to go.”

In the end, Ji-heon had no choice but to show his phone screen. He may have wanted to boast a little.

The various expressions on Jeong-oh’s face changed as she read the text message on Ji-heon’s phone screen. She initially scowled but raised her eyebrows as she read the message, then pouted and looked at Ji-heon with dissatisfaction.

“What? She called for you?”

Did she not call me, but rather her father?

Ch94 - Dad is coming.

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At Jeong-oh’s question, Ji-heon puffed up with pride.

“That could be the case.”

He wanted to boast. Just like me.

Understanding Ye-na’s desire to brag about her dad 100%, Ji-heon wore a victorious smile and sought permission from Jeong-oh.

“Since it’s like this, can I go?”

One woman was holding him back, and another was asking him to come. A happy man who was quite popular with both women, his lips kept lifting toward the ceiling.

For a moment, his expression was so soft it seemed almost serious. Jeong-oh found this even more annoying, but she too was a hopeless fool when it came to her daughter.

In any confrontation, they became of one mind when it came to “Princess Ye-na.”

“Be careful. Watch what you say, especially be cautious with names.”

“……”

“Your brother is Jeong Ji-heon, but Ye-na is Lee Ye-na.”

I hope Ye-na doesn’t get hurt again.

“I understand.”

Ji-heon nodded at the delicate admonition.

“Tell me about it when you get back.”

“……”

“I’ll play with you when you come back.”

“I’m not asking to play, you know?”

With a swift response, she snapped back at him. He soothed her with a sneaky kiss and turned away. His steps were even a bit hurried as he walked away.

Eventually, the door that had been opened closed with a click.

Left alone, Jeong-oh vented her dissatisfaction into the air.

“Seriously, who is this guy calling a fox?”

He himself was a far worse sly fox. With his terrible disposition, he couldn’t stand seeing anyone else act slyly, letting out only a sigh.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

In front of the Go academy building.

Dobin, who arrived at the academy first, was waiting for Ye-na with the teacher. It was the day Ye-na, who had missed a day due to illness, was coming back. Dobin also returned to the academy after two days, following Ye-na.

“Why didn’t you come yesterday, Dobin?”

“I heard Ye-na wasn’t coming.”

Dobin answered the teacher’s question with bright eyes. While the kids were learning Go, Dobin was learning about love. For Dobin, the Go academy without Ye-na was like a patbingsu without red beans.

Finally, the bus from Ye-na’s kindergarten arrived. As soon as the door opened, Ye-na cheerfully shouted.

“Park Dobin!”

“Ye-na!”

Dobin jumped up and down as he grabbed Ye-na, who had just gotten off the bus. Ye-na followed his lead, bouncing on her feet.

“Are you not sick anymore? Are you all better?”

“Yes, I’m all better.”

“Are you really okay, Ye-na? Can you go to the academy today? If you can’t go, you have to call Grandma. She’s coming to pick you up.”

“I’m fine.”

Ye-na answered lightly to Dobin and the teacher’s questions and headed to the academy just like her usual cheerful self.

In the middle of the class, when the teacher stepped out, Dobin whispered to Ye-na.

“I thought you were dead.”

Recalling the memory of desperately crying when he thought his beloved Ye-na was dead, Dobin’s eyes became moist again.

“I called out ‘Ye-na!’ more than a hundred times at the hospital. Did you hear me?”

“No, I didn’t hear you.”

“Wow! That’s amazing. I called really loudly.”

Dobin thought he should call out even louder next time.

“But why did you faint?”

At the follow-up question, Ye-na whispered to Dobin, pointing to the diagonal corner of the classroom.

“The truth is, those guys and their brother scolded me.”

Ye-na pointed to Su-in, who was huddled with her shoulders raised.

“Why did they scold you?”

“When I said I had a dad, they called it a lie and told me to call my dad.”

Dobin, who became extremely sensitive regarding anything related to Ye-na, pressed his lips tightly, as if trying to hold back tears. Ye-na scolded him with a concerned expression.

“Hey, how can you cry!”

“I’m not crying.”

Dobin wiped the tears that had gathered on his eyelashes. In truth, Ye-na felt grateful for Dobin’s reaction. She wanted to tell him the real important story quickly.

It’s okay. I have a dad too.

With a fluttering heart waiting for her dad, her lips quivered.

Ye-na was so happy, but Dobin, who had just heard about the incident, felt a surge of anger. Unable to contain his frustration, Dobin approached Su-in and spoke up.

“Hey.”

Su-in blinked her eyes and stared.

“Aren’t you going to apologize to Ye-na?”

“Why?”

“You did something wrong to Ye-na.”

At Dobin’s remark, Su-in’s face twisted in discomfort.

“Hurry up and say you’re sorry.”

“No way!”

Su-in shouted and ran out of the classroom. Spotting the principal at the entrance, she grabbed onto the principal’s clothes, bursting into tears.

“What’s wrong? Why is Su-in like this?” the principal asked, startled.

“Teacher, she did something wrong to Ye-na, but she won’t say she’s sorry.”

Dobin and Ye-na also came out of the classroom. Dobin spoke clearly to the principal again and scolded Su-in.

“You almost made Ye-na die.”

Just then, the academy door opened. It was Su-in’s mom.

“Mommy!”

Seeing her mother’s face, Su-in let go of the principal’s clothes and ran over. Su-in’s mom was also taken aback.

“What’s going on, teacher?”

The principal responded with a troubled expression.

“Su-in’s mother, I mentioned yesterday that there was an incident involving Su-in, Jae-in, and Ye-na.”

“Right. Our kids said that girl doesn’t have a dad.”

“Mom, she’s making me apologize to Ye-na. Uwaaah!”

Su-in pointed at Dobin, her crying growing louder. Su-in’s mom’s heart ached at her child’s tears, and she murmured quietly in frustration.

“But… how can you say that to a kid who doesn’t have a dad? You can’t just say there’s no dad…”

“Ye-na fainted because of this, so I think it would be better for them to resolve this and get along, Su-in’s mother…”

“Wait, teacher. How can you only take her side?”

At the principal’s response, Su-in’s mom felt a surge of anger. It wasn’t just her child who was wrong, and she was dissatisfied with the academy’s handling of the situation.

“Is it really our kids’ fault that she fainted? We don’t know if it was because of them or if it was because of her own insecurities. Kids from single-parent families often react this way. They can blow things out of proportion because of their feelings of inferiority.”

While wiping her child’s tears, Su-in’s mom continued to vent her frustrations at the principal.

“Are you pushing our Su-in to apologize because of that? A seven-year-old is crying like this?”

Once she said it, her anger grew stronger. Recognizing that the child standing next to Dobin was Ye-na, Su-in’s mom stepped closer and asked.

“Are you Ye-na?”

“Yes.”

“Ye-na, I need to talk to your mom. When is she coming?”

“My dad is coming.”

“What, what?”

As Su-in’s mom’s eyes widened in surprise, the academy door opened, and Ji-heon entered. Seeing Ye-na through the glass door of the academy, Ji-heon hurriedly opened the door.

“Dad!”

A flush of color appeared on Ye-na’s previously expressionless face. She swiftly ran to Ji-heon and hugged him.

“Huh?”

Watching Ye-na call Ji-heon “Dad” and run to him, Dobin blinked, looking at Ji-heon and Ye-na. However, he remained silent, sensing that Ji-heon wasn’t actually Ye-na’s dad.

Some unknown force in the universe kept Dobin’s mouth shut. This was the first moment he had shown awareness.

As Ye-na hugged Ji-heon tightly, she spoke to the principal.

“This is my dad.”

“We’re friends with my dad.”

Dobin, butting in, introduced Ji-heon, despite it being nosy.

Ji-heon set Ye-na down and scanned his surroundings. He was puzzled by the attention he was receiving. Something must have happened.

Having briefly assessed the principal, vice-principal, and the parents of Jae-in and Su-in before coming to the academy, he quickly grasped the situation.

“Hello. I’m Ye-na’s dad.”

As Ji-heon greeted the principal, Su-in's mom quietly mumbled.

"No, it can't be… she said she didn't have a dad…"

Ye-na pointed at Su-in.

"Dad, this is Hong Su-in. She said I don't have a dad and called me a liar."

"When did I?!"

Su-in protested, her voice raised.

"You did!"

"……"

"Dad, she lost to me in Go. So she said something to me because I was better at it."

"No way! You forced the win!"

"You can't lie. I remember all the games we played. Do you remember?"

"Ye-na has a good memory."

As Ye-na pressed Su-in, Dobin chimed in excitedly. Su-in, feeling frustrated, pressed her lips tightly together. Ye-na continued questioning.

"Why did you do that? Were you mad because you lost to me in Go?"

"No! I wasn't mad!"

Su-in yelled. The kids in the classroom rushed out. Even Su-in's brother, Jae-in, joined the group. Su-in clung to her mom's arm, throwing a tantrum.

"You said it! You said she didn't have a dad! But she's lying, and that's why I told her not to lie! Uwaaah!"

Once again, the crying erupted. Su-in's mom was flustered, patting her child gently, while Su-in continued to sob.

"Why is Su-in the only one being asked to apologize? Su-in is crying too!"

"…… They're just kids. They can say things like that. So…"

Su-in's mom argued in a small voice, glancing around at the people.

Ji-heon, now serious, asked Su-in's mom.

"Ms. Su-in, did you tell your children that our Ye-na doesn't have a dad?"

"No, there were rumors in the community…"

"You conveyed what you heard in the community directly to your children."

"……"

"You've made your children into rude liars, mother."

With the provocative comment, Su-in's mom's anger flared. She aimed her frustration at the principal, wanting to shift the blame for the academy's inadequate handling of the situation.

"That's not fair! Why do you keep blaming our kids? Teacher, why do you keep asking them to apologize and making this bigger?"

Dobin jumped in again.

"It's not the teacher's fault. I asked her to apologize."

"Apparently, Dobin asked her to apologize."

Ji-heon supported Dobin's words, causing Su-in's mom to yell at Dobin.

"You! Who are you to tell my kid to apologize!"

"They're kids, so that can happen. Right, Ms. Su-in?"

Ji-heon defended Dobin. Su-in's mom's face turned bright red.

"Kids may not be able to apologize. That's why they're kids. Let's excuse the children for that."

"……"

"Since an adult and guardian like you just arrived, you can apologize to my child on her behalf."

Ji-heon took a step towards Su-in's mom. She felt as though Ji-heon was the grim reaper approaching her and stepped back, fear evident in her eyes.

However, she couldn't escape Ji-heon's grasp.

Just then, the class bell rang, creating a chaotic atmosphere. Ji-heon stepped closer to Su-in's mom and spoke in a low voice that only she could hear.

"Let's handle this properly, Ms. Su-in. It seems like Jae-in and Jae-in's friends are watching. It would be less embarrassing for your child if we resolve this without further trouble, don't you think?"

"……"

"As an adult, you should watch what you say in front of the children."

She felt so creeped out that it felt like her heart might stop.

Ch95 - Did You Save the Universe?

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Facing Jiheon’s fierce gaze, Suin’s mother trembled with both hands.

“Jaein, Suin, let’s go home.”

In the end, she didn’t say sorry.

“Teacher, we can’t send our kids to this academy anymore. Please refund the tuition.”

Instead, they completely withdrew from the academy.

“Teacher, you know our Jaein was preparing for a Go tournament, right? If he wins, it would be great for the academy’s promotion, but it’s a shame. If you continue running things like this, the academy might have to close.”

Suin’s mother, tightly holding onto both Jaein and Suin’s hands, continued to cast curses. It was not a graceful exit.

The principal didn’t bother trying to hold Suin’s mother back.

“I apologize for the inconvenience.”

After Suin’s mother left, Jiheon apologized to the principal.

“No, it’s alright.”

Later, it turned out that Suin’s mother had been threatening to transfer to a competing academy unless Jaein received special instruction for a long time. With their departure, the principal also showed a relieved expression.

Shortly afterward, Jinseo arrived at the academy. Upon recognizing Jiheon, she greeted him warmly.

“Today, Jiheon is here to pick up Yeona!”

“Yes. Hello.”

Jiheon politely replied to Jinseo, greeted the academy teachers, and left the academy with Yeona and Dobin.

As they descended the stairs, Dobin told Jinseo about the day’s events.

“Mom, today, Suin’s mom fought with the Go uncle. But the Go uncle said he was Yeona’s dad.”

“Dobin, the Go uncle really is Yeona’s dad.”

Jinseo informed Dobin. Blinking in confusion, Dobin asked, “Why?”

“There’s no why. He’s Yeona’s dad, so he is.”

“Why?”

Not knowing the backstory between Yeona and Jiheon, Dobin could only be confused. Hearing this, Yeona answered for him.

“He lost his dad but found him again.”

“Wow! Really?”

“Yeah. We have the same blood too. Right, Dad?”

“Why?”

While Yeona spoke to Jiheon, Dobin suddenly interjected again.

Stuck in the cycle of “why,” Dobin received the explanation that Yeona had heard at noon.

“Dobin, it’s just like how beans come from where beans are planted, and red beans come from where red beans are planted. That’s how our dad is our dad.”

“What does that mean? Are you saying the Go uncle was planted like a bean?”

Dobin asked again, failing to grasp the metaphor. It seemed that it would take a long time to convince Dobin.

– After today’s meeting about hair loss prevention shampoo, can you spare a moment? I have something urgent to discuss.

After receiving the text from Jeongoo, Team Leader Yang Sumi-ran and Deputy Park Yeong-gwang remained in the conference room. Soon, Deputy Ko Eun-joo also returned to the conference room and took her seat.

Although Jeongoo had called the meeting, he had rushed out immediately after and hadn’t shown up yet.

Sumi-ran asked Eun-joo, “Where’s Jeongoo?”

“He went to call Gi-hoon.”

“Jeongoo said he had something to say. What could it be?”

The team members’ expressions were very dark, so Sumi-ran intentionally brightened her voice while asking. Eun-joo answered with a pout.

“Don’t you already know? You’re the one with the best intuition, Team Leader.”

Ah, so Deputy Ko Eun-joo noticed too. Sumi-ran awkwardly smiled and replied.

“If I pretend not to know, the person speaking will feel more inclined to talk, right?”

“Do we have to make it comfortable for them? Gi-hoon is practically dying.”

“Still, we should celebrate what’s worth celebrating, right?”

“I really dislike that.”

Sumi-ran tried to lighten the mood, but it was useless. Eun-joo replied cynically.

“I dislike the atmosphere where couples stamp their approval and get recognized. I really dislike Director Jeong Ji-heon, and to be honest, I wish this Deputy wouldn’t cling to him. I think I’d feel better if our fresh Gi-hoon and this Deputy end up together.”

“That’s still not okay.”

Sumi-ran countered, looking at Eun-joo, who was getting heated.

“You can’t interfere with their relationship, even if all the couples in the world break up.”

“No, Team Leader, whose side are you on?”

Eun-joo expressed her passionate opinion. It was a new side of the usually unflappable Ko Eun-joo.

“How can the angelic Jeongoo fall for that psycho? How can you say that? Our smart and hardworking Song Gi-hoon is suffering like this, and you’re not even angry?”

Yet, we can’t obstruct fate.

Sumi-ran could only smile awkwardly without saying anything.

Before more harsh words could come from Eun-joo, the conference room door opened, and Jeongoo entered.

“I’m sorry for being late.”

“Where’s Gi-hoon?”

“He… left work early.”

In response to Sumi-ran’s question, Jeongoo answered with a sheepish expression. Eun-joo turned away and let out a frustrated sigh. There had never been a moment when she felt so resentful of Jeongoo as today.

Jeongoo opened his mouth.

“I’m sorry to take up your time when you’re all busy. The reason I called this urgent meeting is…”

“I already know, Deputy.”

Eun-joo couldn’t help but interrupt Jeongoo as he was about to speak. Jeongoo looked momentarily stunned at Eun-joo’s cold response.

“How do you know?”

“Everyone has a sense of it.”

“…So, do you know that my daughter is the biological daughter of Director Jeong Ji-heon?”

This time, Eun-joo’s eyes went blank. She couldn’t believe what she had just heard. Deputy Park Yeong-gwang stared at her, mouth agape like someone who had just seen a ghost.

“Oh, you didn’t know that. That’s what I was trying to tell you.”

“Wait, wait, wait. What, what, what did you just say?”

A chill ran down her spine. It felt as if she had frozen from her fingertips to her toes. What did you just say? That Lee Jeongoo’s daughter is whose daughter?

“Who’s daughter are you talking about?”

Eun-joo couldn’t trust what she had just heard.

At some point, Eun-joo had seen a photo of Yeona. A princess knows a princess. Eun-joo thought that Yeona, with her beauty and charm, had the same blood running through her veins as she did. Yeona had to be a noble being born from something noble.

But whose biological daughter? Not even an adopted daughter, but a biological one?

Despite Eun-joo and Yeong-gwang being stunned into silence by the shock, Sumi-ran’s expression remained calm. Feeling betrayed, Eun-joo turned to Sumi-ran and asked, “Was that what you meant earlier, Team Leader?”

“Did you know, Team Leader?”

Jeongoo, surprised by Sumi-ran’s reaction, asked. Sumi-ran awkwardly nodded.

“Didn’t this deputy mention it before? That she knew Director Jeong before his accident…”

In fact, the only person who had a clear understanding of the relationship between Jeong Ji-heon and Lee Jeongoo was Team Leader Seong Sumi-ran.

Sumi-ran had sensed their connection a long time ago. That’s why she had spent many days staring blankly at Jeongoo. She sensed it but couldn’t believe it, itching to ask but unable to.

“I thought it could be true since the accident happened seven years ago and the child is seven years old. I wasn’t completely sure, though.”

Still, she had been too hesitant to ask, feeling frustrated, but today she was honestly relieved to discover that secret.

While the excited Eun-joo fanned her flushed face, Yeong-gwang asked, “Did you tell Gi-hoon?”

“Yes.”

“What was his reaction?”

“…He blinked blankly and then left.”

“It was a game he could never win from the start. So, he must have left in shock.”

With news of their relationship, plus the child news, it was surely adding insult to injury.

“Deputy Park, go comfort Gi-hoon.”

“Sure, I will.”

At Sumi-ran’s request, Yeong-gwang stood up first. Eun-joo followed suit.

Sumi-ran comforted the tense Jeongoo.

“Don’t worry, Deputy. Gi-hoon is a bright person, so he’ll shake it off and come back to work tomorrow as if nothing happened. He’s just a bit dazed right now.”

“Yes, I believe so too.”

Eun-joo stuck close to Yeong-gwang and chatted.

“Didn’t you go on a business trip with the director and not know this?”

“Seriously, I had no idea. How could something so dramatic happen?”

“Ah! I was just badmouthing Director Jeong about this deputy!”

***

Eun-joo seized the opportunity to vent her frustration when no one else was around.

“Knowing the truth makes me hate the person I disliked even more.”

The deserving ones will always get what they want. This fact left her feeling very unsatisfied.

“It seems there are no kind gods in this world. How on earth did that guy, with such a temperament, manage to have a perfect Deputy Lee Jeongoo, and even get such a beautiful daughter?”

“…”

“Did he save the universe or something?”

Eun-joo felt that she would grow to dislike Jiheon even more.

The team members went to comfort Gi-hoon, leaving Jeongoo alone in the office for the first time in a while.

It had been quite a tumultuous day, and it seemed like the aftereffects would linger for a long time. However, after sharing everything with the team, Jeongoo also felt relieved. Though it was chaotic now, the kind-hearted team members would continue to support him.

‘Jeong Ji-heon will probably like that I spilled everything.’

Why should I clean up after the mess you made?

Though he felt a bit dissatisfied with that fact, seeing Jiheon looking at him from afar softened his heart. After dropping Yeona off at a restaurant, he returned to the company. Upon seeing Jiheon heading to his office, Jeongoo trailed behind him.

Noticing Jeongoo following, Jiheon left the door to his office open.

Inside the office, Jiheon was waiting by the door. As she stepped inside, he pulled her further in.

In Jiheon’s embrace, Jeongoo heard the door click shut behind them.

It was quite a strange feeling. During the day, she had been furious, but as she resolved one daily issue after another, her heart gradually calmed.

To coexist, two perfect strangers who had lived differently must first have many things in place. One of those is being able to resolve anger. Understanding you, who is different from me.

Going forward, we will have to resolve countless conflicts step by step and return to embrace each other.

I told the team everything. Are you satisfied now?

Just as she was about to express that sentiment, Jiheon spoke first.

“I love you.”

His softly resonant voice felt overwhelming, and Jeongoo froze. She held her breath. A clear tear quickly formed in her eyes.

Seeing her reaction, Jiheon took a half step back and lowered his head, asking, “What’s wrong? Why are you crying? Did something happen?”

“You just made me cry!”

Her heart raced painfully.

How could this be happening?

So suddenly, out of nowhere, without any time to prepare myself.

What am I supposed to do if you confess like this, as if it were a weekly report or a morning greeting to Yeona?

“What the heck? Out of nowhere!”

Why are you telling me this now?

“Why do you suddenly say something you’ve never said before?”

Why do you say that so casually? So easily.

Why have you never said it before if you could say it so easily?

“It just suddenly came to me.”

“…”

“I regretted not saying it before.”

He lowered his eyelids and replied, while her face was twisted in emotion.

“Why! You!”

Each word from Jeongoo struck him in the chest, a string of bitter complaints spilling out.

“Why did you hold back! For seven years! Seven years!”

Love, why did you come now?

Seven years ago, that one word could have made all the difference.

Because he hadn’t said it, she felt insecure.

Not hearing those words, she had let him go.

“Because you didn’t say that, I thought I was abandoned.”

Because you didn’t tell me you loved me, I couldn’t love myself.

The deep resentment surged within her, but soon she found herself clinging back to Jiheon, nestled in his embrace.

He too was breathing with a painful smile that couldn’t be brushed off. Eventually, Jeongoo’s palm, which had been hitting Jiheon, found its resting place on his broad back.

“From now on, say it more often. At least once a week, got it?”

“Once a week isn’t enough, is it?”

“Just make sure to say it at least once a week.”

For the first time, she heard Jiheon let out a playful laugh in response to her grumbling.

“I love you.”

***

Even after Dad came into the picture, Yeona’s daily routine didn’t change much.

After finishing her classes, she would return to her grandmother’s restaurant, watching people come and go, before heading home with her grandmother.

Although it seemed like there weren’t many customers at the restaurant that day, neither her grandmother nor Yeona worried too much. Guk-soon, who was having the happiest and most fulfilling days of the year, gratefully accepted this as well and wrapped up the day’s business early.

“Let’s go home, my puppy!”

At the mention of going home, Yeona joyfully scampered after her like a puppy. On the way home, she was excited to tell her grandmother how cool Dad had been at the academy today.

When they got home, she needed to style her doll’s hair, take out the jelly she had frozen the day before, and stick on the temporary tattoos Dobin had given her. Even as Guk-soon locked up the restaurant, she was bubbling with excitement, her feet dancing with anticipation.

“Grandma, hurry up! At this rate, it’ll be morning!”

“Oh, alright. Our little boss.”

While hearing her granddaughter’s nagging, Guk-soon wore a warm smile. Just like Yeona, she enjoyed this time of returning home after finishing her daily tasks.

However, the moment she turned to hold the child’s hand, Guk-soon’s smile vanished.

A woman and a man holding a small camera were standing there. They were taking pictures of the exterior of “Guk-soon Baekban” without her permission.

“Is this the restaurant that makes that, um, garbage stew?”

Ch96 - Mother’s Life

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Jiheon opened up to Jeongoo about his past.

A story from long ago, back when Jiheon was just a vague memory of his time in the Go genius class.

“It’s an embarrassing story, but my mother was like that. She would casually interfere and impose restrictions while throwing in the words ‘I love you.’”

“I love you, my son. I’m doing all this because I love you.”

With a mother who continuously used the phrase “I love you” as a means of manipulation, his own love had inevitably become twisted. Those words felt like pressure, heavy and sometimes insincere, rendering them insignificant.

He regretted not being able to say those words to Lee Jeongoo, especially since the shape of love he knew had likely changed after meeting her seven years ago.

His love had truly begun to blossom, but after the accident, everything was lost.

Now, he vowed he would never lose it again.

“So, saying this feels really cheesy,” he admitted.

“…….”

“Still, I love you.”

He thought he needed to say it more often.

After seven years, Jeongoo finally wiped her tears and embraced Jiheon.

The realization that something was wrong with Guk-soon came about while wrapping up work. After receiving a call from Guk-soon, Jeongoo hurried home with Jiheon and searched video sites until they found the problematic footage.

The segment about Guk-soon Baekban was brief. At the end of a BJ’s restaurant exploration video, Guk-soon’s restaurant appeared. The BJ ordered three servings of baekban, and when they scooped up a spoonful of the stew, a piece of garbage surfaced.

It was half of a coffee mix packet. The video ended with two companions silently aghast at the discovery.

Upon seeing the video, Guk-soon’s face turned pale.

“I never drank that coffee….”

Jeongoo immediately recognized the person in the video. Although it was pixelated, the acquaintance sitting opposite the BJ was undoubtedly Chae Eun-bi.

The day Chae Eun-bi came to Guk-soon Baekban, ordered three servings of baekban, and left without taking a single bite was also the day she had handed Yeona 50,000 won.

After watching the video, Jeongoo let out a heavy sigh.

“So this is what happened.”

“Do you know the whole story?” Jiheon asked.

“We’re not that careless. It’s all recorded on our restaurant’s CCTV.”

Jeongoo pulled up the separately saved CCTV footage to show Jiheon and Guk-soon.

On the day Eun-bi visited Guk-soon Baekban, Jeongoo had been cleaning the restaurant alone and reviewed the CCTV footage. After the food came out, the three of them looked around and pulled something out of their bags to stir into the stew.

He was curious about what they were doing, and it turned out they had thrown trash into the pot.

Jiheon was baffled.

“Didn’t they realize there were cameras? There’s a sign indicating the CCTV installation, right? Why would they do that?”

“Look at how the three of them are acting. They only noticed one camera.”

Jeongoo pointed to another camera revealed in the footage. Indeed, the three were glancing furtively toward the other camera while completely blocking the view of the one they didn’t notice.

They must have thought it was enough to be careful of just one camera, which ironically made their actions more clearly captured on the opposite camera.

“It’s best to handle this quickly,” Jiheon suggested.

Following Jiheon’s advice, Jeongoo swiftly created an account on the video site. The BJ’s video had already surpassed 150,000 views, with around 100,000 subscribers.

If they didn’t take action soon, the number of viewers who had seen the misleading video would only increase.

Jeongoo contacted Deputy Park Young-gwang. She asked him to help when he came to work the next morning. After hearing the situation, Young-gwang rushed to the company, where he had been having drinks with Gi-hoon nearby. Jiheon also decided to return to the company.

Jiheon and Young-gwang edited the CCTV footage to compare it with the problematic video, while Jeongoo drafted a statement. Jiheon added a line about taking legal action to the statement.

While they were editing, the number of viewers for the problematic video continued to rise. Moreover, other creators who had seen the video began creating secondary content about it.

Eventually, aggressive subscribers found Guk-soon Baekban's name and posted its address in the comments.

"Mom, don't worry. By tomorrow morning, it'll all be sorted out," Jeongoo reassured Guk-soon, who was trembling in anxiety. Around midnight, they posted the video and the statement. Jeongoo also left the edited video's link in the comments of the BJ's video.

Throughout the night, Jeongoo monitored both the BJ's channel and her own. About an hour after Jeongoo's video was posted, the view count began to rise.

It seemed the BJ had realized the existence of the CCTV footage, as they deleted Jeongoo's comment on their channel. However, another subscriber reposted Jeongoo's channel address, and her video slowly began to spread.

A few hours later, reactions began to pour in on the BJ's channel. Harsh comments targeting the BJ followed in droves.

– The restaurant owner has posted the CCTV footage. But it's quite different from the video here. Please reveal the truth.

– This is manipulated. Everyone, please check the CCTV footage first.

– Looks like they edited the video to stir up drama. Insane. Just insane.

– Who is this fraud? If it weren't for the CCTV, a perfectly good restaurant would have been ruined.

Eventually, the BJ faced strong criticism from subscribers and deleted the problematic video. It took just four hours after Jeongoo posted the CCTV

footage to resolve the situation.

Finally, a peaceful morning arrived.

Jungoo’s body felt sluggish from not getting enough sleep.

While he was lazily leaning back in his chair and dozing off, Gi-hoon, who had come to work, spoke to him.

“Deputy.”

“Ah, Gi-hoon.”

“Are you okay?”

After looking so despondent yesterday, Gi-hoon showed up today with a bright face, even asking about Jungoo’s well-being. It seemed he had overcome everything overnight, which was somewhat reassuring.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“I checked that video too. When I tried to look it up again this morning, it was gone. That crazy guy must have cleaned it up himself, right?”

“Yeah, the video has been taken down, but there are now secondary edits popping up, and I’m reaching out to each one. Some people are taking down their posts and issuing apologies, but the most common ones are those who are editing and posting our CCTV footage.”

“This is going to blow up.”

“I’m okay, but I’m worried about my mom.”

At Jungoo’s response, Gi-hoon sighed as if it were his own problem. Jungoo cautiously asked, “Are you feeling alright, Gi-hoon?”

“Oh, I’m fine.”

Gi-hoon looked somewhat awkward at Jungoo’s question.

“Your story is really something that could become an international topic.”

“I’m sorry for not mentioning it sooner, Gi-hoon.”

“No, it’s okay. I was so shocked that I was just blank, but I’m alright now.”

“…….”

“Actually, I came back to the office last night. I watched the deputy and the director editing that CCTV footage, and I was overwhelmed by the director’s gaze.”

The gaze of someone deeply in love, someone no one could stop. The moment Gi-hoon confirmed that, he realized something.

“I think the director is a good person.”

He understood he could never compete with Jeong Jiheon.

A day passed relatively uneventfully. Jungoo worked late as usual and left the office around 9 PM. He felt anxious since Yeona had mentioned that her grandmother was at the restaurant again today.

That night, when Yeona had gone to bed early, Jungoo entered Guk-soon’s room and spoke to her.

“Why don’t you take a break today?”

“I didn’t work today. I just went to tidy up.”

“…….”

“I’ve put the place up for sale.”

Jungoo’s heart sank at Guk-soon’s response.

"……Why?"

"Why? Because I think it's time to do so."

The thought that his mother had to sacrifice herself again because of him, and again because of Chae Eun-bi, brought tears to his eyes. He held back his tears and tried to persuade Guk-soon.

"Is it because of that video? Mom, that's all been sorted out. It'll be okay."

But Guk-soon smiled as if that wasn't the problem.

"Do you like it better when I keep working?"

"……."

"If that's what you want, then I'll keep doing it."

Jungoo couldn't respond to his mother's question. It felt as if someone had struck him on the head.

For some time, he thought his mother worked because she enjoyed it. She had always taught him to pursue what he loved and what he wanted to do. He had assumed she felt the same way simply because he loved working. It was a narrow-minded perspective.

Jungoo protested.

"Why are you asking for my opinion? What matters is what you want."

"Your opinion is always the most important to me."

"……."

"I started working to raise you and to raise Yeona when I came back to Seoul. But now that I've met Yeona's father, it's time for me to step back."

A lot had happened in just a few days. Finding the child's father, discussions of marriage with the son of a chaebol, her granddaughter

collapsing, and now he was being inexplicably slandered.

After experiencing so many events, Guk-soon began to consider what she could do. She realized that insisting on continuing the restaurant business wasn't the answer. She needed to protect her daughter in a different way.

She couldn't let her daughter suffer because of the gossip surrounding their restaurant on the market's edge.

"I wanted to get a chef's license when I was young, but I never had the time. It used to be that being good at cooking didn't mean much, but these days, there are jobs like culinary researchers, cooking BJs, and so on. Seeing people my age on TV cooking beautifully and impressing others makes me really envious and excited."

"……."

"I don't know how long I can start from now, but I just want my daughter to support me. That's what I need the most."

After a long contemplation, she found a solution that could convince everyone.

Right now, it was just words, but this turning point in her life might lead her to greater happiness. She thought it was a good choice.

"I always felt sorry for Yeona commuting to and from the restaurant every day, but this is good. Now, I can cook at home and take care of Yeona."

"No, Mom."

"……."

"I was wrong. You don't need to worry about Yeona. You should live your own life."

Her mother spoke with a constant smile, but the child's face was filled with sorrow. The thought that she had made her daughter cry again brought tears to Guk-soon's eyes as well.

"I'm sorry. I only thought about myself. I've been living comfortably my whole life. From now on, do everything you want to do. Learn what you want to learn and go study abroad, just like I did."

"……."

"If you meet a good man, date him, introduce him to me, and get married. You should do that too."

"Why are you crying while saying such nice things?"

Guk-soon gently stroked her daughter's back as she buried her face in her lap, wiping her tears on her mother's pants.

"Even if you want to send me far away, I can't go anywhere now. My life is all within you."

Eventually, bending down, Guk-soon reached out and playfully patted Jungoo's bottom. When she was young, she had done the same to her beloved child, who was now just as old as Jungoo.

Even as time passed, her child remained endlessly adorable.

There were times when raising you felt overwhelmingly difficult, but through you, she always found the strength to carry on.

I love you. I love you, my beautiful daughter.

Though my love for you seems so shabby for someone as precious as you, I love you all the same.

Ch97 - Please Give It Back

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On Wednesday, after Eun-yeop's request, Eun-bi waited eagerly for Eun-yeop's contact. While not going to work, she took care of herself for the first time in a long while, pondering how to comfort Ji-heon and Mrs. Jang Young-mi.

However, there was no contact from Eun-yeop. Unable to wait any longer, Eun-bi called Eun-yeop first, but he didn't answer. Ultimately, the next day, Eun-bi went to Eun-yeop's office.

"Oppa."

"Why are you here again?"

In just one day, Eun-yeop's appearance had deteriorated significantly. He looked emaciated, and his sharp voice came with an irritated tone.

"Why didn't you contact me? What happened? Did you fail?"

Eun-bi asked, but Eun-yeop only frowned and didn't respond. It was indeed his failure.

Eun-bi was appalled. He had treated her like a fool all this time. He had boasted as if he could handle everything alone, and after waiting quietly, this was the outcome.

Disappointed in her brother, Eun-bi left the law firm and went straight to find a friend. This was a friend she had recently visited with at Guk-soon's restaurant. Though not a popular BJ, the friend ran an internet broadcasting channel on various platforms.

On the day they visited Guk-soon’s restaurant, Eun-bi had played a prank with this friend. She had found a piece of trash in her bag and secretly placed it into the stew Guk-soon served.

Then, she acted shocked as if she had just discovered it. The entire act was recorded by her friend’s camera. Now was the time to make use of the video footage she had been unable to use due to Eun-yeop’s pressure.

When Eun-bi visited her friend, she pleaded with her to include a segment about their visit to Guk-soon’s restaurant at the end of a food review video. She didn’t forget to have her face mosaicked.

Watching the well-edited video her friend had made filled her with excitement. Yet, she also felt a twinge of regret. If only she had acted more quickly, Ji-heon might have lost interest in Lee Jung-o sooner. She should have informed Mrs. Jang Young-mi earlier too.

More important than whether Lee Ji-yeon was Ji-heon’s biological child was the status and dignity of the Ji-heon family. Mrs. Jang Young-mi could never view someone like Lee Jung-o, who brought shame to her family, favorably.

[Are we going to be okay? What if we get sued for lying? We managed to avoid the CCTV, right?]
As they edited the video, Eun-bi’s BJ friend asked anxiously. Eun-bi comforted her friend.

“Of course! There were no other customers, and I covered the camera well. No one knows about this now.”

[Why am I feeling so anxious?]
“It’s fine. Just trust me. If he falls out of the picture, I’ll reward you.”

Eun-bi calmed her whiny friend and finally got her to post the video, excitedly watching the situation unfold.

However, an unexpected disaster struck. Around midnight, Jung-o uploaded the video. When Eun-bi’s BJ friend checked the video Jung-o had uploaded,

she contacted Eun-bi, demanding answers.

[Hey, what is this! Was there another CCTV? You said there was only one camera! You assured me you checked everything!]
“Oh, no… I checked everything!”

Eun-bi couldn’t believe it either. She had thoroughly looked around the restaurant. There was only one camera, and she thought she had blocked it well with her body during the act. She never expected there would be another camera right across from her.

[How could this happen! You told me to trust you! What are we going to do now!]
The BJ friend yelled at Eun-bi.

“First, delete the video you uploaded. And close the comments section completely.”

Eun-bi felt dizzy, but she calmly advised her friend. Even if something went wrong, her face wouldn’t be shown, so she thought there would be no consequences. She believed they just needed to handle the video and reassure her friend.

But the situation continued to escalate. Even after her friend deleted the video, people kept creating second-hand edits.

The video passed through the hands of various editors, turning her friend into an even more malicious villain. A few days later, one of Jung-o’s channel subscribers left a shocking comment.

– I visited the restaurant today, and I heard they’re closing it down. I asked the owner if they were relocating, but she said she wouldn’t be operating the restaurant anymore. It seems the owner was deeply affected by this incident. Although I couldn’t go often, I would visit at least once a month, enjoying the home-cooked meals, and it breaks my heart that it’s closing for such a ridiculous reason. I can only imagine how the owner must feel.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

Time flew by, and it was the last day of operations for “Guk-soon’s Restaurant.”

In just a few days, the number of customers visiting the restaurant significantly increased. Some came to express their sorrow over the news of its closing, while others discovered Guk-soon’s Baekban for the first time through Jung-o’s channel.

Everyone marveled at Guk-soon’s cooking and lamented the loss of the restaurant. Some customers pleaded with her not to close down.

It had been a favorite lunchtime spot for local office workers, who typically had tight budgets, but today, customers streamed in continuously. Jung-o took a day off to help her mother, and Ji-heon rushed to the restaurant after finishing work.

Guk-soon took charge of the kitchen while occasionally stepping out to greet customers as they left. She handed each departing guest a piece of baeksuk (steamed white rice cake) with the same heartfelt intention she had on the first day the restaurant opened, celebrating a new beginning.

The loyal customers weren’t just passive, either. Gifts piled up in one corner of the restaurant, as everyone supported Guk-soon and wished her well. It was a warm but modest farewell.

Before long, the baeksuk that had been ordered ran out, and the food that had been abundantly prepared in the kitchen was also gone. After bidding farewell to the last customers and turning off the sign lights, Ji-heon presented Guk-soon with a large bouquet of flowers.

On a table that had been tidied up, a cake with flickering candles awaited.

“Grandma! Blow out the candles quickly!”

Yena rushed over, pulling on Guk-soon’s arm. As Guk-soon stood in front of the cake, her family began to sing.

“La la la, la la la. La la la, la la la. Congratulations, Guk-soon.”

The birthday song was a clumsy rendition with the words “la la la” inserted, and while it was unclear what exactly they were celebrating, Guk-soon felt pure joy.

I am truly happy. I have a family that I can’t be envious of.

Filled with pride, she blew out the candles, and Ji-heon, Jung-o, and Yena each offered their congratulations.

“Mother, you’ve worked hard all this time.”

“Mom! This is just the beginning. Life really starts at fifty-three!”

“Grandma! Congratulations on graduating from the restaurant!”

Clap, clap, clap! Yena clapped her hands and hurried over to the table piled with gifts. For Yena, who loved birthday parties, today was also an exciting day with plenty of presents.

“Grandma! Can I open the presents?”

Guk-soon’s eyes welled up as she looked at the heaps of gifts.

“Oh dear. I don’t even know if I deserve all this. If I had just quietly closed the restaurant, no one would have known, but now the whole country knows, and it’s so embarrassing to close like this.”

“Grandma, can I open the presents or not!”

Before Guk-soon could sigh long enough, Yena urged her impatiently.

“Okay, let’s open them together.”

Unable to resist her granddaughter’s enthusiasm, Guk-soon moved to the adjacent table. Various gifts emerged: cosmetics, work uniforms, shoes, magnifying glasses, and books. Any gift Yena struggled to unwrap was passed on to Jung-o.

“Mom, there’s a letter in this box.”

Inside a flat box was a hand mirror along with an envelope. As Jung-o pulled out the letter paper, she cleared her throat.

“I’ll read it. Dear Ms. Lee Guk-soon.”

The letter began with a formal tone.

“Hello, Ms. Lee. I am the person who operated an office in the alley across from the market a few years ago. Do you remember the time when my business partner disappeared, leaving me with debts, and I had to close my shop? You took me to your restaurant and fed me while I wiped away my tears.”

Guk-soon strained to remember, her brows furrowed as she listened to Jung-o’s voice.

“As I was leaving the restaurant, you packed a generous portion of delicious side dishes for me and told me to come back if I needed more. That meal was the best of my life…”

Jung-o’s voice started to falter, and she couldn’t hold back her tears. Instead of tears, laughter filled Guk-soon’s eyes at her daughter’s ridiculous sobs.

“Oh dear, that’s the problem with her. If anything happens to me, she pretends to be in more pain!”

“When have I ever!”

Jung-o pouted, annoyed at her mother for teasing her.

“Mom, stop it. Just stop.”

Yena, just as she had comforted Jung-o, gently patted her back. Ji-heon took the letter Jung-o was holding and continued reading.

“When I lost faith in everyone and had lost everything, I found great comfort in knowing there was someone willing to share kindness with me. Thanks to you, I have been able to face each day without despair and live diligently.”

Guk-soon smiled contentedly at Ji-heon’s calm, dignified voice.

“Thank you for the truly delicious meals and warm words back then. I will support you in whatever you do. Wishing you good health and happiness.”

It was a heartfelt letter. After Ji-heon finished reading it, she handed it to Guk-soon, who shyly touched her cheek.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t seem to remember it well.”

This meant that she had done so much good that she couldn’t remember each act of kindness. Ji-heon and Jung-o exchanged knowing smiles.

Guk-soon let out a refreshing sigh, genuinely feeling relieved.

“Just like Yena said, it really feels like graduation.”

She had lived her life diligently. While raising her child, who then had a child of their own, the restaurant had become a home, clothing, and even a fun toy for her family.

Now, preparing to part with such a cherished restaurant, she was ready for a new beginning.

“Though I didn’t graduate properly from school, it feels like I’m really graduating from the restaurant. I’m so proud.”

With her family there to share this final moment, Guk-soon felt happier than anyone could envy.

“Post something online too. Let everyone know that Mom isn’t closing the restaurant due to conflicts with that BJ, but rather preparing to try something new.”

“To be honest, I kind of want to let the backlash continue a bit longer.”

Jung-o complained but couldn’t go against her mother’s wishes, so she immediately grabbed her phone.

“…Huh?”

But as soon as she logged into her account, a frown appeared on her face. Dozens of messages had arrived in Jung-o’s inbox, filled with condemnation from unknown people.

“What’s going on?” Ji-heon asked, stepping closer.

“…Looks like that BJ posted something new?”

Jung-o quickly entered the BJ’s channel to check the latest updates. A lengthy post had been published on the channel’s bulletin board.

– Hello. I would like to explain the recent unfortunate incident. The restaurant in question is actually run by the family of my friend’s girlfriend’s mistress. My friend, who was about to get married, was dumped by his girlfriend after four years of dedication, and due to the mistress’s scheming, he faced the risk of being fired from his well-paying job. I really didn’t want to go this far, but after hearing about my friend’s plight, I couldn’t hold back and posted the video in a fit of rage.

I can’t believe I’m becoming the mistress.

Jung-o’s hand trembled at the BJ’s outrageous claims.

– You can say whatever you want about me. However, I do not believe that I am the only one at fault. To the mistress, please come to your senses and return my friend’s girlfriend. No matter what you’ve done with him or how much you’ve talked behind his back, my friend doesn’t care. So please, just return her.

Ch98 - Lovesickness

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Jaegwang had developed a new habit. During work hours, he would often sigh while looking at photos of his granddaughter.

He had no idea that his two sons could be so adorable; was it because she was a grandchild? Or was it because she was a girl?

Or was it just that she was inherently beautiful?

Or perhaps it was because he couldn’t reach out to her easily?

“Don’t keep them waiting too long. I told you to hurry up and take care of things.”

It had been a week since he parted ways with Ji-heon at the genetic research institute, and he felt hurt by Ji-heon’s actions.

Jaegwang regretted the past. On the day he went for the paternity test, he should have been firmer. He should have clearly told Ji-heon to bring Yena and her mother within the week.

“I should have at least exchanged phone numbers.”

He had, in fact, managed to get Yena’s phone number through dubious channels. However, since they hadn’t formally exchanged numbers, he couldn’t reach out directly.

He was certain that if he called carelessly, he would just end up getting scolded by his son again. Knowing the number but being unable to contact her was its own form of torture.

At first, he had been waiting eagerly for a call, but as time dragged on, frustration began to bubble up. He felt tightness in his chest and nausea in his stomach.

That Ji-heon, even after becoming a father, didn't even think about how his father must feel was infuriating.

"I have a great reputation at work. But my sons treat me like a joke."

Jaegwang couldn't vent to Ji-heon directly, so he quietly lamented to his secretary about his situation.

"What on earth are they doing? How busy can they be to not even send a single message? Find out."

Unable to hold back, Jaegwang instructed his secretary.

After a while, the secretary returned with some information.

"Chairman, Director Ji-heon is currently at work, but…"

"But what?"

"It seems that there is a bit of a problem between Director Ji-heon and Assistant Lee Jung-o…"

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After the BJ's revelation about calling Jung-o his mistress, various comments spread overnight in the online world.

Of course, most users didn't believe the BJ's confession. However, some crafted narratives that suited their tastes and attacked Jung-o based on their beliefs. It was a stir created just for the sake of creating chaos.

Guk-soon had told them to be patient now that the restaurant was closed. If they remained quiet, those trying to cause trouble would tire themselves out and leave. Thus, Jung-o didn't show her feelings too much either.

So, the next morning at Max Planning's Production Team 2.

"Hang in there, Assistant Lee," Eun-joo said, offering her encouragement. As always, her expression was as aloof as ever.

"Evil doers don't just fall; they always take someone down with them," Jung-o retorted before asking if Eun-joo knew what had happened the night before.

"I heard there are many people who will fight for Cha Eun-bi. It's nice to see someone else stepping up to fight for her. Those people must be feeling sorry, not even realizing they're falling alongside her."

While it was nice to hear someone say "hang in there, don't worry," it was also a great comfort to have someone to curse with. Jung-o felt relieved by Eun-joo's matter-of-fact remarks, like a scratch to an itch.

Yes, she would have to endure and not fall along with them. Just as she gathered her resolve and sat down, the phone on her desk rang.

"Yes. This is Lee Jung-o from Production Team 2."

"I'm Jeong Jae-gwang."
Jung-o was at a loss for words upon hearing the voice from the receiver.

"Can Ji-heon come to my office now? I'd like to talk."
While Jung-o stood there in shock, a calm voice continued from the other end. It was a gentle tone that seemed at odds with the image of the stern chairman.

Jung-o hadn't heard that the chairman would be visiting the company. It seemed like a sudden visit.

After answering, Jung-o hung up and immediately headed to Ji-heon's office. His steps were stiff with tension as he reached the door, where his secretary opened it for him.

As Jung-o entered, Jae-gwang stood up from his seat. Ji-heon was nowhere to be seen, and the absence of Ji-heon made him feel even more lost.

“Hello, Chairman.”

“Yes, please have a seat.”

With a stiff greeting, Jae-gwang nodded and gestured toward the sofa. After Jung-o sat down, Jae-gwang took his seat across from him.

In the silence, Jae-gwang spoke first.

“I…”
“…”
“I’m lovesick.”

Jung-o flinched at Jae-gwang’s unexpected confession and looked up. He hesitated on how to respond, but fortunately, Jae-gwang continued speaking.

“When will I hear from my granddaughter? Will she call today? Tomorrow? When tomorrow comes, will it be today again…? It’s already been a week of waiting like this.”

It was a lament. A confession of lovesickness toward his granddaughter. The sorrow of an uncertain wait.

Hearing the heartfelt feelings of the chairman, who had seemed so distant, made him feel strangely close. The tension in his muscles relaxed a bit. However, it wasn’t a moment to smile. Jung-o seriously apologized.

“…I’m sorry.”

“No, I didn’t say that to get an apology.”

“…”

“My child was involved in a fake relationship or something.”

With a wave of his hand, Jae-gwang changed the subject. It seemed that Ji-heon had confessed to his past mistakes. However, Jung-o found it difficult

to respond comfortably. It didn't feel right to discuss such matters in Ji-heon's absence.

Jae-gwang urged him, "Feel free to talk. I have a general idea already."

"…Yes. That's what I heard."

"Because of that, he's currently entangled with Cha Eun-bi."

Having no choice but to give a one-word answer, Jung-o felt the pressure of further questioning, so he quickly asked, "Yes. Chairman, where is Director Ji-heon right now?"

"Director? Hmph."
With a scoff that indicated his disdain, Jae-gwang pointed to a corner of the office. "He's over there."

"…"

"On the thinking chair."

It was a spot obscured by a tall bookshelf, making it hard to see. Jung-o caught sight of Ji-heon sitting on a small chair, facing the wall. The gray top he wore blended in with the wall, camouflaging him.

Is he a chameleon?

Jung-o barely stifled a laugh at the absurdity of it.

"I told him to reflect and think a bit."

A man over thirty, punished by his father because of a fake relationship.

"Let's not worry about him and just talk," Jae-gwang said.

Despite Jung-o and Jae-gwang's glances and gestures, Ji-heon didn't budge. Although he was in the wrong, there was something pitiable about him.

"The way he is must have made Yena's mom very upset."

“Yes, a bit.”

“Right? I figured as much.”

Only then did Jae-gwang’s spirits fully return. He felt that he could finally speak his mind in the conference room as if he were having a meeting.

Although he felt sorry for Ji-heon, Jung-o was very grateful to Jae-gwang. The slight grudge that had lingered after Ji-heon had approached him first and after Yena’s paternity test results came back melted away.

“I raised my son wrong. I’m sorry.”

“No, not at all.”

“He’ll be like this until Yena’s mother forgives him.”

“Yes. I feel relieved now too. But I’d appreciate it if Ji-heon could sincerely apologize to me about this.”

Jae-gwang turned his head to Ji-heon and said, “Did you hear that?”

“Yes.”

“Come over here and apologize.”

Ji-heon stood up and walked closer to Jung-o.

“I’m sorry.”

“Say it again with sincerity.”

As soon as Ji-heon apologized, Jae-gwang sharply pointed it out. Without any whining, Ji-heon immediately apologized again.

“I’m sorry.”

“Be sincere and tell me what you’re sorry for.”

“I’m sorry for causing a misunderstanding by having a fake relationship with Cha Eun-bi. I’m also sorry for making Lee Jung-o the target of slander.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I’ll resolve this as quickly as possible.”

Ji-heon answered Jae-gwang’s question with a serious look in his eyes directed at Jung-o. The whole situation felt absurd, yet the people involved were unyieldingly serious, making it even funnier. Jung-o found it hard to respond to Ji-heon’s apology while stifling his laughter.

“Yes. I’m all good now.”

Jung-o answered.

Satisfaction. It felt refreshing.

“Are you sure there’s nothing else bothering you?”

“No, there isn’t. Well then, Chairman, may I leave now? I have a meeting scheduled for this morning.”

It was a relief that he could quickly leave this spot since he had another appointment.

“Sure, sure. We’ll meet again.”

Jung-o left the office feeling satisfied as Jae-gwang saw him off.

After Jung-o left, Jae-gwang sighed deeply in the now-quiet office.

“He calls me ‘Chairman.’”

Jae-gwang wanted to blame his son for the feeling of disappointment that arose from the title. With narrowed eyes, he expressed his dissatisfaction to Ji-heon.

“Honestly, I feel quite upset. I made my feelings clear that day, so why has it taken a week for you to show your face, just to show me a child? Do I have to come up with excuses to see you like this?”

But this son of his showed no signs of remorse and kept facing him.

“You should’ve persuaded Mom more,” Ji-heon replied.

“Why should I?”
“Mom came to the company. Jung-o wouldn’t take her in and only wants to raise the child.”

A rigid wrinkle formed on Jae-gwang’s forehead. In a household where there was no communication, he was unaware that such things had occurred.

“You haven’t been very concerned about it, have you? You knew there was conflict between your mother and Jung-o that day but never spoke to her directly.”

Ji-heon’s pointed remark made Jae-gwang’s voice shrink.

“…My mother doesn’t talk to me about those things.”

“To be honest, neither of you communicate with each other.”

“Where would we find the time to talk? More than half the year, I’m on business trips.”

“And yet you miss Yena.”

Jae-gwang clenched his lips. The excuse of being too busy was, in fact, a selfish justification.

He had always prioritized work over family matters. He had never offered a warm word to his wife. Naturally, he showed no interest in her trivial stories.

“I don’t know what we both like anymore.”

His mind had become rigid, unable to react to anything outside of work.

Meanwhile, an invisible wall had formed between him and his wife.

Furthermore, the issue with the paternity test had made Yeong-mi quite angry. Since she had yelled at him for causing trouble, Jae-gwang hadn't dared to speak to her.

"…I'll talk to her," he said, acknowledging his negligence and vowing to make amends.

"Do you have any idea what Cha Eun-bi is doing now?"

"She's been absent without leave for two weeks. She had also been neglecting her work before that."

Jae-gwang let out a weary sigh.

"You might not know, but your mother liked Eun-bi a lot. Eun-bi did well, and even during those months when you didn't come home, Eun-bi would come over and keep your mother company."

"She must've found a suitable target."

"I was grateful to that girl, but the lack of communication led to this mess…"

Jae-gwang realized that he had been quite deceived. The family, lacking strong bonds, had developed weaknesses of their own.

Now, what should he do? With that BJ or whatever causing a stir as well…

After falling into deep contemplation, Jae-gwang finally spoke again.

"Why don't we just reveal everything?"

He was a person of resolute decision-making, just as much as his son.

Ch99 - Exposure

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Eun-bi continued to ponder how she should live her life moving forward.

Her BJ friend, who was in trouble due to a manipulated broadcast, had done something outrageous. He had turned Ji-heon into an unfaithful man and Jung-o into his mistress. The story Eun-bi had shared with him in frustration before visiting Guksun Baekban had come back to haunt her.

After that, the BJ requested help from Eun-bi. He insisted they needed to reveal the truth to destroy Jung-o and restore their honor. Eun-bi found herself at a crossroads.

While she was deep in thought, a call came in. The caller was Ji-heon.

She realized the positive function of this exposure battle. Ji-heon, who had not even checked in on her during her absence and had never reached out to the Production Team 1 members, was now contacting her directly.

“Hello?”

[It’s been a while.] Hearing Ji-heon’s voice after so long nearly brought her to tears.

I really liked you, Oppa.

She still did. If he were to give up on Jung-o and come back to her, she would be ready to accept him. If he brought Yena with him, she could raise Yena too. She could even dedicate herself to his parents.

But she couldn’t bring herself to say those heartfelt words. Instead, Eun-bi asked with a sulky tone.

“What’s up?”

[I contacted you because one of the staff at the headquarters has been absent without leave for a long time.] “……”

[Are you going to come back to work?] “Is that an easy thing for you to say? How can I go back there?”

[You still need to settle things properly, don’t you?] He wasn’t trying to hold her back at all. The harshness of his words made her stomach churn.

[You need to come in tomorrow. Production Team 1 is struggling because of your absence without any notice.] “……Do you have anything else to say?”

[You still need to come in. We need to wrap things up properly.] “…….”

[Let’s talk tomorrow.] He avoided her question, quickly summarizing the matter and hanging up.

Maybe it was because it had been a while, but his voice sounded strangely cold yet gentle. She felt her resolve shake again, but now she understood. She had to let go of Ji-heon. The man she had liked for more than ten years and invested over four years in.

Imagining Jung-o standing next to Ji-heon, the anger inside her flared up again.

With tears in her eyes, Eun-bi picked up her phone again. The only person she could rely on now. The only man who would be on her side. She wanted to call him and seek his opinion.

The man picked up the phone right away.

“Director Jung wants you to come to the company tomorrow. He wants you to settle things properly.”

Eun-bi complained about what had just happened to the man, almost like a child. He asked.

[So, are you just going to sort everything out and leave?] “I want to endure it, but what can I do? I have no way out. I’m at a disadvantage here.”

[But you still have a weapon, right?] “…….”

[The fact that you were Director Jung’s lover.] The man’s answer cleared Eun-bi’s mind. The BJ had already described her as a victim on his channel. The company still believed that she and Ji-heon had been in a romantic relationship and had broken up. Indeed, it was a weapon she could use.

[In a love rivalry, preemptive strikes are crucial. Who gets to claim the victim’s position first is key.] That’s right. She couldn’t just leave quietly like this.

If she couldn’t have Ji-heon, then Jung-o shouldn’t be able to have him either. To do that, Jung-o had to be ruined. She needed to humiliate her.

Just like the BJ did, she would explode the situation. It wasn’t impossible.

Determined, Eun-bi’s eyes sparkled with a sharp light.

“Yeah. I’ll drop the bomb.”

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

The next day, as Ji-heon had requested, Eun-bi returned to work after a long absence.

As expected, no one welcomed her back. Her unexplained absence had caused her team too much trouble. Even Deputy Yoo-ri looked at her with displeasure.

“Looks like you had it easy. You’ve put on some weight.”

It was true that having stayed at home for so long, her body had become soft, and she had been sleeping all day due to having nothing to do. Eun-bi,

stung by Yoo-ri’s words, offered another excuse.

“I’m just swollen. I’m not as well as you think.”

Eun-bi apologized gracefully.

“I’m going to resign. I’m really sorry for how things turned out. I feel wronged and upset too.”

And subtly, she hinted that she was the victim in this situation.

After tidying up her desk, Eun-bi expressed her intention to resign to Team Leader Ahn. He prepared the necessary paperwork without trying to convince her to stay.

“You just need to get the director’s signature and submit it.”

How could her last moment at a company where she had dedicated her youth end up like this?

Receiving Team Leader Ahn’s approval file, Eun-bi glanced across the room. There was Jung-o, the instigator of it all.

Jung-o was so engrossed in her work that she didn’t spare a thought for Eun-bi, even as she packed up her things for her resignation. She occasionally smiled and chatted with her team members.

We’ll see if you can still smile like that in an hour.

Eun-bi snickered to herself as she went to find Ji-heon. Without saying a word, she handed him the paperwork. Ji-heon skimmed through it before speaking.

“It’s a shame that it’s ending like this.”

It seemed he was disappointed not to see a responsible side of her. But only the phrase “It’s a shame” echoed deeply in Eun-bi’s ears, stirring her emotions.

I’ve built so many memories going back and forth to your home. I could have been a good wife for you.

She also wanted to save Ji-heon from being bewitched by the witch-like Jung-o, who had taken the easy path.

“Oppa, you’re being deceived right now. Jung-o is holding you back with the excuse that she has a child!”

Eun-bi poured her heart out to Ji-heon, making one last appeal.

“This is all Jung-o’s scheme. Why would she hide that she was pregnant with your child seven years ago? It wasn’t the child you wanted. Jung-o secretly gave birth to the child with the intention of claiming your wealth or inheritance later. And now she’s come back because she’s sure you’ve lost your memory! Don’t you understand?”

“Cha Eun-bi. That’s not it.”

But nothing got through to him. His calm voice, almost heavy with decorum, interrupted Eun-bi’s words.

“I found Jung-o.”

“…….”

“My memory has returned.”

Eun-bi’s eyes trembled.

“Jung-o hasn’t told me anything first. In fact, she misinterpreted our fake relationship and became even more cautious. I was the one who got entangled with someone like her.”

Ji-heon continued to speak calmly. It was the first time he was sharing their story.

“I didn’t even know Jung-o had a child. I certainly had no idea that the child was mine. And remember, you were the one who exposed the fact that

Jung-o had a child at the company.”

At Ji-heon’s remark, Eun-bi swallowed her tears.

“Make sure to hand over your responsibilities properly. And organize the computer files well.”

“…….”

“You’ve worked hard.”

After finishing his words, Ji-heon handed Eun-bi the paperwork he had signed neatly.

Now, his gaze seemed almost kind, as if he were wishing her well for her future. He no longer glared at her with the cold, piercing eyes he had before. However, that dignified and calm pressure tightened around Eun-bi’s chest even more.

As she left the office with the documents, she encountered Team Leader Ahn Chan-seop again.

“Manager Chae, please hand over the materials you were responsible for before you leave. Don’t forget to send emails to the planning team and check in with the handover person to let them know what to do with each item.”

“Are you assigning tasks to someone who’s leaving today?”

“I also don’t want to make this difficult for you. But what can I do? A lot of holes have appeared in the work during your absence. If you don’t do the handover properly, the next person will have a hard time.”

Eun-bi opened her mouth to argue but then closed it.

Right. Today, I’ll make sure to be the true victim.

She sat down and turned on her PC. Her desktop was cluttered with files. Organizing it seemed impossible even if she stayed up all night.

Moreover, asking her to check the handover person for each file was too tedious for her to take on while leaving the company.

Eun-bi connected her personal PC to the company's shared folder and inserted a download link in the email she was sending. Then she added a meaningful note.

"I am leaving this beloved company due to personal reasons. The affection I had for this place is matched only by my heartbreak. I hope none of my colleagues experience what I have. I apologize for not being able to say goodbye to each of you personally. I plan to give away some of my cherished items while organizing my desk. I'll be leaving at 3 PM today, so I would appreciate it if you could stop by before then. Thank you for everything. Take care."

A neatly composed message that piqued curiosity. It was a kind note that clearly expressed her position as a victim.

Now it's up to you all.

With a light heart, Eun-bi clicked the "send" button on the all-staff email and headed to the HR department with the paperwork. When she returned after submitting the documents, she found the area around Production Team 1 in disarray.

Not only the handover personnel from the brands she had been responsible for but also employees she hadn't been close to during her time at the company had gathered. They seemed excited at the prospect of receiving some of her cherished items.

"Beggars love free stuff," she scoffed to herself. Anyway, it looked like her final moments would make for a good stage.

"Manager Chae, I heard you're leaving the company."

The team leader from the planning department approached her with a look of pity.

Behind the planning team leader, Deputy Jo Si-nae came forward, looking distressed.

“Manager! Why are you leaving?!”

Seeing Deputy Jo, who remained loyal even after being ousted from the team, made Eun-bi tear up for real.

“I didn’t want to either…”

Eun-bi hugged Si-nae and burst into tears.

“I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to keep my position. You know how much loyalty I had….”

“Manager Chae, what on earth happened? What unfair thing happened to you…?”

The planning team leader, softened by Eun-bi’s tears, stepped closer to ask. The surrounding people started murmuring. Deputy Jo Si-nae, feeling indignant, shouted.

“Don’t you know why Manager Chae is leaving? The man she was going to marry was cheating with another woman! And that woman is roaming around the same company!”

Deputy Jo Si-nae was about to leave for another company herself, so her words came out without hesitation.

Eun-bi felt a thrill of excitement inside.

Yes, Deputy Jo Si-nae. Keep going! Keep going until you reveal Jung-o’s name!

Someone cautiously asked,

“So you mean… the director has a mistress, and that’s why Manager Chae broke up with him?”

“Didn’t you know? That mistress is taking all of Manager Chae’s work…”

As Deputy Jo continued to glare at Jung-o’s position, Song Gi-hoon from Production Team 2 suddenly stood up.

“Manager Chae, what is this material?”

The flow of the conversation abruptly stopped. Eun-bi shot Gi-hoon a glare.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s something strange among the files in the download link you sent.”

“There were too many files for me to check each one. I thought it would be good for you to filter them out on your own, Gi-hoon.”

“No, this is really strange. It’s a recording file. Didn’t you check it?”

Gi-hoon lifted his laptop onto the partition and showed it to Eun-bi. In the folder accessed through the email’s download link was a file titled ‘Jung Ji-heon0604.’ It was a recording file. Gi-hoon clicked on the file.

[Did I ever ask you for anything? Why are you using my name for something you wanted to do? I never expected anything from you.] [We agreed to date! That was the promise! If we agreed to date, then we have to put in effort! I’ve worked this hard!]

Eun-bi’s heart dropped as she recognized the voices. It was her and Ji-heon.

It was a conversation they had fought over in Ji-heon’s office long ago. The conversation where Jung Ji-heon nailed down their fake relationship.

What on earth… How is this here?

“Why… is this…?”

Even while Eun-bi was frozen in shock, the stark truth continued to play from Gi-hoon’s computer.

[Eun-bi Chae. We only dated to cover up rumors from four years ago. You said that too, remember? After that, you should have wrapped things up instead of creating baseless rumors.] [….] [Just stop it. Wrap it up within a week. I'll overlook all your bravado and lies up until now.]

My weapon. The weapon that proved I was Ji-heon's girlfriend…

The crowd began to murmur. The way people looked at Eun-bi changed. Those who had felt a little sorry for her were now unable to hide their confusion.

Deputy Ko Eun-joo also stood up from her seat and asked Eun-bi, "Manager… when did you record this?"

"I… I didn't do it! It was Director Jung Ji-heon who recorded it!"

"Oh, so the recording is true."

Eun-joo nodded.

"No!"

Eun-bi shouted, her face flushed red.

Ch100 - Is this okay?

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Tears welled up in Eun-bi’s eyes.

This wasn’t my goal. The plan was to reveal that Lee Jung-o was Jung Ji-heon’s mistress!

Right next to her, Jung Ji-o appeared completely indifferent to the situation, continuing to work with a blank expression.

I was supposed to be the victim! You were supposed to be the mistress!

Even Jo Si-nae, who had comforted Eun-bi, seemed shocked by the recording. Eun-bi approached Si-nae to complain.

“Si-nae, you know? This is all slander. You understand, right? You’ve been wronged too.”

However, Si-nae shook her head and began to step back.

She was the only one who had heard both Ji-heon’s and Eun-bi’s one-sided claims. She had supported Eun-bi’s claims because it was advantageous for her.

But now, with the recording of their conversation, everything was out in the open.

“…Manager, please don’t contact me anymore. I can’t trust you now.”

A swift cut-off. Those watching the scene looked at Eun-bi with disgust.

“No! That’s not it! It’s you! Jung Ji-o, you did this!”

“What’s wrong with her? She must be crazy,” Eun-joo muttered as if looking at a bug.

Ultimately, Eun-bi was chased out, shouting that the file was fake, leaving in an undignified exit.

An hour later, an email arrived at Max Planning’s employees.

“Dear colleagues, this is Jung Ji-heon, Head of Planning and Production Division 1.

Due to the mistake of a production team employee who has left Max Planning, personal data related to employees has been leaked. As the head of the division and a related party, I sincerely apologize to everyone.

I also urge those who downloaded the leaked recording file today to delete it as soon as possible.”

Although Ji-heon requested the recording files be deleted, employees eagerly saved them instead.

The most entertaining thing in the world is watching a fight, and among those, the best is a love triangle.

Employees, who had been wandering around with ghostly eyes due to work, began to engage in lively discussions for the first time in a while. In every gathering of two or more, they inevitably talked about Jung Ji-heon and Chae Eun-bi.

“Did you see the recording file that Manager Chae Eun-bi uploaded?”

“Of course. So, the rumor about Manager Chae Eun-bi and Director Jung Ji-heon getting married was just a baseless rumor. And it was spread solely by Manager Chae.”

“I didn’t think she was like that, but after what she said to Deputy Jung Ji-o last time, it seems like she has delusions of grandeur.”

“I thought she would be a decent person coming from a family of lawyers. Oh, I’m so glad I’m not involved with someone like that. They say the people taking over her work now are all in a bad state.”

“But Director Jung Ji-heon is surprisingly foolish. At his age and position, getting caught up in a fake relationship?”

Most of the comments were criticisms of Eun-bi, but Ji-heon couldn’t escape criticism either. Only the Production Team 2, suspecting that Ji-heon had intentionally intervened to resolve the conflict, looked relieved.

Among them, Deputy Ko Eun-joo was the most excited.

“This is so much fun! It’s so thrilling!”

It would be nice if only Eun-bi were being criticized, but seeing Ji-heon being criticized too made Jung Ji-o feel slightly resentful.

“Deputy Ko, don’t you think you’re enjoying this a bit too much?”

“Deputy Lee, let’s be honest. This should have been revealed a long time ago. The truth has burst forth in such a dramatic situation; how lucky and refreshing is that? Especially right before your name came up in the gossip!”

“But soon, my name will come out too. People love rumors. Plus, Eun-bi pointed me out.”

“Are you really worried?”

“Just a bit. That’s all.”

Jung Ji-o replied weakly to Eun-joo’s concerned question.

This was just the beginning for Jung Ji-o. There were still many things that hadn’t been revealed in the company. When people found out that his daughter was Ji-heon’s biological child, how excited would they become? Just imagining it made him feel exhausted already.

After a moment of silence, Eun-joo shared her thoughts.

“Deputy, for me, it doesn’t matter if I’m not liked by anyone at work. I’m not here to gain favor; I’m here to make money. And I know well enough that I’m pretty without needing anyone to tell me.”

“…”

“I don’t need to be sensitive. You know that, right? If you’re not obsessed with being loved, you can do a lot more.”

With Eun-joo’s encouragement, Jung Ji-o slowly nodded.

She was right. Deputy Ko Eun-joo always found ways to navigate work while maintaining boundaries with her colleagues. Though her personality was quite different from his, she was an incredibly supportive person.

“Thank you. I’ll pull myself together.”

Eun-joo smiled shyly at Jung Ji-o’s heartfelt gratitude.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

After the recording file scandal broke, Seung-kyu, worried about Ji-heon’s well-being, rushed to his office. Ji-heon was sitting on the sofa, looking at his phone.

He was so engrossed in whatever content he was looking at that he even let out occasional chuckles.

“Jung Ji-heon… are you okay?”

Are you okay, or have you lost your mind?

I was relieved that he looked lively rather than downcast, but he didn’t seem like someone who had just caused a major incident, which made me even more worried. Seung-kyu sat down next to Ji-heon and sighed heavily, letting out his frustrations.

“I don’t know if you saved a country in your past life, but it seems you did protect it.”

“…”

“Regardless of your social standing being at rock bottom, your determination to expose injustice and put yourself on the line is impressive.”

“…”

“But are you completely out of it right now, or do you just want to avoid everything?”

“Do you want to see something?”

Ji-heon, who hadn’t responded, finally stretched out his hand to show his phone screen. It was a text message thread with Ye-na.

– I hope Dad comes to pick me up from the academy.

Seung-kyu frowned as he read the message.

“What’s this?”

“It’s from Ye-na.”

“…”

“It’s the first text Ye-na has ever sent me, and look, she didn’t make a single spelling mistake. Look at how she wrote ‘good.’ Not many seven-year-olds can do that, right?”

…I’m such a fool for worrying about this kid.

“Yeah. My son barely learned Hangul.”

“Who does Ye-na take after to be so smart?”

“What do you want to hear?”

Advertisements

“Is it because her mom is a copywriter? She must have inherited her mom’s writing skills.”

Jung Ji-heon’s daughter, Lee Ye-na, sent a text with sixteen characters and has the potential to become a future copywriter.

Why can’t I bear to see this already?

Seung-kyu snatched Ji-heon’s phone and flipped it face down on the table.

“Enough of this nonsense. What happened? Chae Eun-bi couldn’t possibly have had that recording file.”

Seung-kyu asked sharply. No matter how shortsighted Eun-bi was, there was no way she would store something that could harm her in the company’s computer.

Ji-heon picked up his phone from the table and replied casually.

“You know that if an employee has a problem, the company can access that employee’s PC at their discretion. I have that authority for PCs within the division.”

“…So you took advantage of Eun-bi being away to put your file on her computer?”

“It was a mistake too.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?”

“I really didn’t think Eun-bi would blow this up like this.”

It seemed plausible. Seung-kyu’s mouth hung open in disbelief. Ji-heon continued his confession.

“It was a long time ago. I just wished Eun-bi would accidentally click something while cleaning her PC, and that recording would slip into someone else’s ears, even just a little. That was my simple wish. It was really just a simple wish.”

“…”

“The plan was to get Eun-bi out of the company quickly and then post the truth on the internal bulletin board, saying how she spread false rumors that made my life hard.”

“…”

“Well, anyway, it’s all sorted out now, so I have nothing to say. It seems like fate was on my side. I was lucky.”

…I’m getting a bit of chills.

Why did fate grant luck to someone as dreadful as him?

Seung-kyu brushed down the goosebumps on his arms.

“Well, it’s good that it was resolved, but what if Eun-bi brings it up as a problem?”

“The PC isn’t a personal item; it’s company property, and I have the right to use it. There’s no problem according to company regulations.”

He was surprisingly nonchalant for someone who caused the problem.

Seung-kyu let out a frustrated sigh.

Ah, I had briefly forgotten that you’re the type of person.

He had a terrifying way of hiding sharp claws under a demeanor that seemed to find everything bothersome. He would be the most troublesome to face as an enemy.

I should have been worried about celebrities, not about you. How foolish of me.

As I stared at him in frustration, Ji-heon, fiddling with his phone, asked,

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“…”

“I just hope Ye-na takes after Deputy Jung Ji-o more than you.”

“Don’t worry about that. She’s just like Jung Oh. Can’t you tell from this text message? Oh, there’s more! Want to see this? When I told her to sleep well, she sent two ‘ㅇ’ characters. Then…”

“Ah, this is so annoying! Just stop!”

Advertisements

Unable to hold back any longer, Seung-kyu shouted.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

The restaurant space belonging to Guk-soon sold quickly. They say a chicken shop will move in next. Since they plan to use the existing equipment from the restaurant, there isn’t much for Guk-soon to clean up.

While Guk-soon was sharing important information with the new owner, Jung-oh quietly sat in the restaurant, waiting with Ye-na.

While Jung-oh sat there absentmindedly, his daughter seemed very busy. She was giggling while looking at her phone screen, which piqued Jung-oh’s curiosity.

“Princess Ye-na, what’s so funny over there?”

“It’s a secret.”

Ye-na turned her back on Jung-oh and bent her head down deeply. That phone only has text messaging and calling features, so what could possibly be so entertaining?

On the way home, Ye-na continued to stare at her phone.

“Lee Ye-na, you need to put your phone down and watch where you’re walking.”

Jung-oh warned Ye-na, who was holding her mom’s hand with one hand while fiddling with her phone with the other.

“Okay.”

Ye-na smiled and put her phone away.

Guk-soon asked Jung-oh, “Is Ye-na’s dad coming today?”

“Dad is coming at nine tonight.”

Ye-na answered instead of Jung-oh. This was news Jung-oh hadn’t heard. Jung-oh asked Ye-na,

“Did you talk to Dad?”

“Yep. By text.”

“Let me see.”

“No way!”

“There’s no secret between you and Mom! Let me see!”

“No! No!”

Ye-na wrapped her arms around the phone hanging from her neck and hid behind her grandmother. Jung-oh pouted at Guk-soon.

“Mom, look at Ye-na. She won’t show me her text messages. I bought that phone for her.”

“She’s just like her mom, the same!”

Order was restored once again. Jung-oh and Ye-na spun around Guk-soon energetically until they reached home. But when they arrived in front of the house, Jung-oh’s expression stiffened.

Ji-heon’s mother, Jang Young-mi, was standing there. It didn’t take long for Young-mi to recognize Jung-oh and Ye-na.

As Young-mi approached with her heels clicking on the ground, Jung-oh gripped Ye-na’s hand tightly.

Ch101 - Waiting for Today

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Jung-oh took a step ahead of Guk-soon and Ye-na. He needed to protect them.

As they got closer to Jang Young-mi, Ye-na recognized her first and shouted, “Oh? I know this lady! We met in the elevator!”

In fact, Ye-na had seen Young-mi a week earlier. When Ye-na went to the genetic research center to confirm the paternity test results, Young-mi was there too. However, Young-mi had left quickly, so Ye-na couldn’t see her face.

“Grandma, this lady pulled my hair like this in the academy elevator!” Ye-na said to Guk-soon. Although it was a bit of a tattletale, it was just from a child’s perspective and lacked any malice. Guk-soon quickly grasped the situation from Ye-na’s explanation and kept quiet. She couldn’t help but feel a sense of propriety, thinking that this person would soon be her daughter’s mother-in-law.

“Right? You gave me 50,000 won.”

After asking twice without receiving a confirming answer from Young-mi, Ye-na quickly told Jung-oh, “Mom, but I didn’t take the money. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Jung-oh calmly replied and greeted Young-mi. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Young-mi replied.

Of course.

It was the same unremarkable beginning as before. It was a response that hinted at what might happen next. Jung-oh quickly started organizing the conversations that could take place in his mind.

In the meantime, Guk-soon took a step forward and greeted Young-mi first. “Hello. Nice to meet you.”

“Mom.”

Jung-oh stepped in front of Guk-soon again. He felt a surge of electricity coursing through his chest.

Mothers always greet first and bow their heads for their daughters. That’s just how our mom is. She’s the kind who gently advises to let things go and move on.

He felt it was also his duty to protect these weak and kind people.

Don’t be discouraged.

“Ye-na, go upstairs with Grandma first.”

When Jung-oh said this, Guk-soon hesitated.

“Mom, it’s okay. Go in first.”

Jung-oh confidently smiled at his mother.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Later that evening, Ji-heon visited Jae-gwang’s office. Jae-gwang had called several times, leaving Ji-heon with no choice. Ji-heon relayed everything that had happened today to Jae-gwang. Understanding that Ji-heon’s choice was the best, Jae-gwang nodded.

“Since you admitted that recording file is yours, they can’t do anything about it.”

“Thanks to Chae Eun-bi gathering quite a crowd, the news spread quickly.”

“Your reputation must have taken a hit.”

“I don’t care.”

“But it will be a problem when you get married. Ye-na and her mom will be talked about. Especially since Ye-na will be starting elementary school next year…”

Jae-gwang sighed, having foreseen aspects that Ji-heon hadn’t considered. Only then did Ji-heon start thinking from a new perspective.

Daycare and elementary school are different. What wasn’t a problem in daycare can become an issue in older age groups, just like it was at the Go academy.

“Now you need to keep a low profile. Don’t cause any trouble.”

“Okay.”

Thanks to Jae-gwang’s advice, Ji-heon realized that he needed to be more cautious. Having a child creates vulnerabilities that didn’t exist before. They’re very lovable vulnerabilities, though.

“How did the paternity test go? Was it really manipulated by Chae Eun-yeob?”

While lost in thought, Jae-gwang asked.

“I’m sure of it. The genetic information on the paternity test result my mother received is the same as the one I got. It seems they intended to mislead us with incorrect information.”

“He’s quite cunning, isn’t he?”

“Yes. However, because they used the same genetic information, we can infer one thing: Someone who received instructions from Chae Eun-yeob likely visited the lab for a test on the same day I did.”

“Even so, uncovering the truth won’t be easy. Even if the lab admits there was a mistake in the test, they won’t reveal whose blood was mixed up, citing privacy concerns. Even if we figure it out through background checks, information that lacks legal validity is useless.”

“This isn’t just negligence; it’s obstruction of work due to corruption. If the lab is uncooperative in identifying those involved, I plan to pursue legal action.”

Ji-heon looked at Jae-gwang, who was nodding quietly.

“What about your father?”

“What about him?”

“You’re close with Chae Eun-yeob’s father.”

“Well…”

Jae-gwang seemed lost in thought, stroking his chin.

“He seems to be ambitious in politics. I should keep my distance.”

Recently, Chae Seo-bok, the father of Eun-yeob and Eun-bi and a Supreme Court judge, had frequently revealed his ambitions to Jae-gwang. This was not the direction Jae-gwang wanted.

“There were good things that came from that family because of you. I thought you and Chae Eun-bi would get married.”

There had been misunderstandings between them. Misunderstandings created by a lack of communication. Now, he wanted to correct those twisted things one by one.

As a moment of silence stretched, Ji-heon, who had been looking at his phone, smiled brightly and stood up.

“I’ve shared everything I needed to, so I’ll be on my way.”

“Why are you leaving so soon?”

“I’m supposed to meet Ye-na at nine.”

Lucky…

Jae-gwang almost voiced this thought out loud.

If it’s Ye-na, I can understand. Jae-gwang waved his hand, urging Ji-heon to hurry. But then Ji-heon froze, still looking at his phone.

“I just got a text from Ye-na…”

“…”

“It seems my mother is there? In front of Jung-oh’s house.”

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After Ye-na and Guk-soon left, Young-mi spoke first.

“Didn’t I tell the child who I am? She’s so rude to call me this lady in front of her grandma.”

“Hearing that makes me relieved you didn’t say who you were, Mrs. Jang.”

“…”

“There’s no grandmother who pulls her granddaughter’s hair without revealing who she is.”

Despite her relatively gentle tone, the content was anything but.

Jung-oh’s counterattack made Young-mi’s eyes narrow with tension. Since what happened in the elevator wouldn’t benefit her, Young-mi shifted her words.

“Did you secretly raise the child? You must have been so bold to do it in secret.”

“If Jung Ji-heon hadn’t lost his memory, we would have raised her together.”

Sticking to his resolve not to be intimidated, Jung-oh countered clearly.

It seemed that Young-mi was taken aback by his confidence. Her eyebrows raised high and then furrowed.

“Why didn’t you say anything back then? Why did you hide it?”

“I was young back then. I knew nothing.”

That day. The day you yelled at me at Jung Ji-heon’s house.

Jung-oh also acknowledged her past foolishness. She had been too young back then. Just dressing like an adult doesn’t make one an adult. It was only after becoming pregnant that she realized how very young she truly was. Until then, she hadn’t even recognized her youth.

“I regret that day too. But would my fate have changed even if I had confronted you more that day?”

Even if she had been harsher or smarter, Jung-oh was sure that the outcome wouldn’t have been much different.

Young-mi didn’t refute Jung-oh’s claims, perhaps acknowledging their validity. Instead, she lamented the present.

“Then why did you show up now? You could have lived like that. Why do you come now to take away my son’s future?”

To Young-mi, Ji-heon was her only son, the center of her universe. He was the son who was kinder than her own father, the source of her strength, her everything.

“How can you tell if you were a lover or a stalker? How can he judge that? How can a simple paternity test prove the past? To me, you’re just a stalker of my son!”

“No, ma’am. You must have known everything. Ji-heon’s phone contained text messages and call logs exchanged between us.”

Jung-oh caught Young-mi off guard.

Ji-heon had one misconception: that he needed to protect Jung-oh, that he had to prevent his mother from coming to see her.

But in reality, Jung-oh didn’t want that. She was waiting for the day when she could meet Mrs. Jang alone.

To convey this.

“Ma’am, I stand proud and dignified. I didn’t implant memories into your son.”

Waiting for the man who had lost his memories. Being foolishly silent was frustrating, but now it had become a past she could confidently discuss.

Because she could be proud and dignified, Jung-oh’s words flowed out smoothly.

“That could have happened. I could have been Ji-heon’s girlfriend and implanted my memories into him to make him realize faster. But I didn’t. I didn’t want to become the same person as you, ma’am.”

If she had forcefully implanted memories, those wouldn’t be Ji-heon’s memories; they would be Jung-oh’s.

“I waited for Ji-heon to remember on his own. You don’t know how painful and anxious that is. The child is growing…”

She spoke confidently, but her voice choked up as she thought of the child.

“What you forcibly blocked, Ji-heon remembered on his own. And he finally realized what he had lost.”

“…”

“You must acknowledge this now, ma’am.”

Jung-oh said with a faint smile.

The strength that came from the time spent waiting and believing. She had that.

She was no longer a weak person.

“Before I met Ji-heon again, and after meeting him, I was equally happy, but Ji-heon was unhappy until he met me. Do you know? A person who has gone from being unhappy to happy becomes desperate. He will strive not to be unhappy again, your son.”

With each of Jung-oh’s words, Young-mi’s clenched fist trembled visibly. It seemed as though that fist could strike her at any moment. Yet, Jung-oh didn’t stop speaking.

“The bond between Ji-heon and me, and between Ye-na and Ji-heon, is more special than you think. If it were a shallow trust, you would have turned away when you presented the false paternity test results.”

“…”

“It’s your choice, ma’am, whether to acknowledge and bless your son’s new family, or to stay stuck where you are. I don’t pressure you. You’re not someone I need in my life.”

Saying harsh words to the mother of the person she loved, which she hadn’t even said to her own mother, was indeed a struggle.

Perhaps, if she knew this, she might distance herself from Ji-heon’s father, Jae-gwang, who had shown her kindness. But she wouldn’t regret the words she had already spoken.

“I will do exactly as you do, ma’am.”

The days she had lived through might not be something to brag about, but the experiences that weren’t brag-worthy had become the strength for her

life.

If she didn’t obsess over being loved, she could do so much. She wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

“If you treat me well, I’ll treat you well. If you ignore me…”

“…”

“I’ll treat you the same way.”

Ch102 - Without you, I'm

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Sung-kyu sat across from Do-bin at a small table, calling out short sentences for him to write.

“Write ‘I like my younger sibling.’”

“Dong! Saeng……!”

Do-bin wrote his father’s words in a loud voice in his notebook.

However, the first syllable that had been strong gradually diminished. After waiting a few minutes, Sung-kyu checked the writing, which ended up being as unfinished as Do-bin’s voice. The words read “I like my younger sibling” (but with a mistake), and Sung-kyu quietly sighed.

“It’s not ‘I like my younger sibling’; it should be ‘I like my younger sibling.’”

After Sung-kyu’s feedback, Do-bin dropped one vowel and completed the phrase as “I like my younger sibling.” Sung-kyu’s voice rose even higher.

“‘Jo’ as in ‘jo!’ Add the ‘hi’ final consonant to it!”

Ye-na could write ‘jo’ so well and write a sixteen-character sentence all by herself, so why couldn’t his son write even six characters correctly?

Do-bin, unable to comprehend his father’s desires, felt frustrated by the sudden dictation instruction.

“Dad, I don’t want to do this.”

“Just a little more. It will be beneficial for you.”

Do-bin looked at Sung-kyu in disbelief.

“How can writing be beneficial?”

“No, it’s helpful for you. Just one more. Write ‘If the sea were land.’”

“What’s land?”

“Land. We call land ‘yukji’ in Korean.”

“So, if the sea were land, is that good?”

“Right. Quickly write, ‘If the sea were land.’”

“I think it wouldn’t be good if the sea were land. Why should I write that?”

“It’s dictation time now!”

“Aha, during dictation time, I write about the sea!”

“Ugh, yes. Quickly write.”

Nodding along with the strange logic, Do-bin picked up his pencil again. With a more serious expression than a famous calligrapher, he wrote ten characters slowly over the course of ten minutes. However, the result was “If the sea were land, it would be ‘joketda’.”

“I taught you just now! It’s ‘jo’! Add the ‘hi’ final consonant!”

Following Sung-kyu’s nagging, Do-bin corrected the writing. But it wasn’t fixed immediately.

“You need to correct this too. It’s not ‘cat,’ it’s ‘get.’ It’s ‘ge’ with a double ‘s’ final consonant. You know what double ‘s’ is, right?”

“Dad, there is a double ‘s,’ but why isn’t there a double ‘n’?”

“Why isn’t there? Because King Sejong didn’t create it!”

“Then you should create it. I’ll call you ‘King.’”

“Stop joking around and write quickly.”

“Dad, I really don’t want to do this.”

Just as the last dictation sentence was approaching, his son collapsed. Sung-kyu sighed and turned his head, noticing that his younger son, Do-yun, was rubbing his hands on the blanket after eating cherries and spitting out the pits.

“Park Do-yun!”

Sung-kyu quickly scooped up Do-yun. The white blanket was already stained red with autumn leaves.

Kids can’t help but make a mess. If they don’t make a mess, they aren’t kids.

Sung-kyu lamented. What should he do? That was the new blanket that Jin-seo had put on today.

Noticing that his father was upset, Do-yun looked around cautiously.

“Sorry, Dad.”

It was hard to get mad at young Do-yun. Sung-kyu quickly resigned himself and comforted Do-yun.

“You shouldn’t say sorry to me.”

“That’s right. I shouldn’t say sorry to Dad; I should say it to the blanket.”

Do-bin chimed in, pretending to know. Sung-kyu could only smile.

Sung-kyu stood the two kids up and began his lesson.

“Park Do-bin, Park Do-yun, listen well. There are times when it’s okay to say sorry, and times when you should admit your mistake. Is it right or wrong to get fruit juice on the blanket?”

“It was Do-yun who did it! I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Anyway, I’m just asking. Is it okay to get fruit juice on the blanket or not?”

“But the teacher said that Shin Saimdang painted with fruit juice.”

“That’s a story about Shin Saimdang!”

Do-bin’s outrageous and cheeky response made Sung-kyu raise his voice again. Jin-seo, who had just returned to the bedroom after talking with Do-yun’s teacher on the phone, giggled at the sight of Sung-kyu.

“Struggling this much with the kids for a moment, what will you do in the future?”

“Mom, please save me!”

Do-bin, who found the dictation too hard, ran over to Jin-seo. Sung-kyu watched that scene with a weary expression and then went out to the kitchen.

Raising kids is the hardest job in the world. The kids only cause trouble, and even when he tries to talk sense into them, they don’t understand. And now there was a third child on the way.

After gulping down cold water, Sung-kyu let out a long sigh as Jin-seo approached him.

“Were you really that tired?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“The floor seems to be sighing heavily,” Jin-seo commented.

“No, no. It was just the water that was really cold,” Sung-kyu made an excuse, but Jin-seo quickly saw through her husband’s feelings.

“Do you know why I like Ye-na so much? What are Ji-heon and Jung-oh planning to do about their new house? Have you heard anything?”

“Well, Ji-heon’s current place is quite spacious. They might go with that.”

“I heard that Jung-oh’s mother feels burdened by places that are too high up.”

“Oh, really? I didn’t know that.”

Sung-kyu answered gruffly, showing little interest, while Jin-seo expressed her desire.

“It would be so nice if they moved near our neighborhood. It would be convenient to visit, and it would be great if Do-bin and Ye-na could go to elementary school together later on. Don’t you think?”

“Oh, yeah, I guess?”

“Ask around a bit. Find out where they plan to get a new house. And try to convince them that our neighborhood is great, okay?”

.....*

Upon hearing that Yeong-mi had visited Jung-oh, Ji-heon and Jae-gwang headed straight to Jung-oh’s house.

Throughout the journey, Jae-gwang nagged Ji-heon.

“Come on, hurry up. Our driver Kim is going to yawn from the back.”

“Yeah, but he’s going alone.”

“I still need to bring your mom along. Just step on it a bit harder. Even my driving would be better than this.”

Under Jae-gwang’s persistent urging, Ji-heon grew increasingly anxious. However, thanks to his father’s insistence, they arrived earlier than expected. They then spotted Jung-oh standing blankly in front of the house.

“Jung-oh!”

After Ji-heon got out, Jae-gwang followed suit.

Jung-oh, who had been standing there, belatedly recognized Jae-gwang and greeted him with a bewildered expression.

“Hello, Chairman.”

“Right, right.”

“What brings you here…?”

“Ye-na sent me a message. She said her mother is here.”

Ji-heon replied to Jung-oh’s trailing question.

“Oh, she left already.”

With an awkward response, Jung-oh’s expression darkened even more. Not only Ji-heon, but Jae-gwang too. Seeing everyone rush over like it was a big deal made Jung-oh reflect on how bold his actions had been.

He had seriously crushed Mrs. Jang Yeong-mi’s pride…

Feeling uncomfortable facing both of them, Jung-oh spoke up.

“As I mentioned before, Ji-heon’s mom can be a bit sensitive. If I said something hurtful…”

“No, it wasn’t like that at all. I’m fine, but… I think I might have hurt the lady.”

Not knowing Jung-oh’s true feelings, Jae-gwang attempted to apologize first, but Jung-oh immediately denied it. Jung-oh’s serious expression

widened Jae-gwang's eyes a bit.

"I'm sorry. You should hurry and go see the lady."

"Yeah, that sounds right."

Understanding Jung-oh's implication, Jae-gwang rushed back to the car that had followed them.

Jung-oh then told Ji-heon as well.

"Oppa, you should go too."

"No, I need to stay here. I told Ye-na I'd be there by nine."

Upon hearing Ji-heon's response, Jung-oh slowly nodded and turned to leave. As Jung-oh ascended the stairs ahead, Ji-heon asked,

"Are you okay?"

"……"

"Don't take to heart whatever your mother says."

"Yeah. I understand."

Jung-oh answered dryly and climbed the stairs, opening the front door.

"Daddy!"

At the sound of the door opening, Ye-na dashed out from her room. Ji-heon picked her up effortlessly.

"Did you have fun today, Ye-na?"

"Yeah!"

Guk-soon, who had been pacing inside the house waiting for Jung-oh, also rushed to the entrance. Switching her gaze between Ji-heon and Jung-oh,

Guk-soon asked,

“Did you… meet with my mother?”

“No, she had already left, so I couldn’t meet her.”

While listening to Ji-heon’s response, Guk-soon’s gaze remained fixed on Jung-oh. With just an hour, her daughter’s face looked drained of energy, and Guk-soon secretly sighed. Yet, she couldn’t reveal this feeling to Ji-heon.

Ji-heon, for his part, was also on edge. He wondered how to bring up this awkwardness and how to apologize, but while he was thinking, Ye-na, clinging to Ji-heon, started fidgeting.

“Daddy, I need to brush my teeth.”

“Okay.”

As Ji-heon tried to set Ye-na down, she clung to him even tighter.

“Ye-na, you can brush your teeth by yourself.”

“No, I can’t do it alone.”

Jung-oh spoke sharply to Ye-na, but Ye-na lightly brushed it off. In the end, Ji-heon carried Ye-na to the bathroom.

After brushing the child’s teeth, washing her face and hands, and reading about three storybooks featuring monsters, Ye-na’s eyelids finally grew heavy.

After gently patting her to sleep and laying her down in her room, Ji-heon greeted Guk-soon and left the house. Jung-oh came down with him. Just like when they were climbing the stairs, Ji-heon felt a tug at his heart when he saw Jung-oh’s gloomy back.

“Jung-oh.”

“What did Mom say to you about Ye-na?”

Jung-oh turned to Ji-heon, who had called her.

“…She said she would raise Ye-na.”

“……”

“So I told her not to say things like that. Let’s pretend I didn’t hear it.”

As Ji-heon confessed with his parched lips, Jung-oh’s voice became even drier.

“I had a rough conversation with her earlier. It wasn’t a fight, but I was the one firing off remarks. I had a lot bottled up inside.”

“……”

“Oppa, I’m going to protect Ye-na. She is my number one priority. That will never change.”

There was no crack in her resolute voice. Ji-heon simply stood there, meeting Jung-oh’s solemn gaze.

“If I have to keep confronting your mother, I will do it. But you don’t have to.”

“……”

“I thought you should be around because you’re the child’s father, but I respect your choice. There’s no need to take a rough path just because of a sense of duty. Even if we can’t become a family, Ye-na will still call you Dad.”

Jung-oh’s words made Ji-heon’s heart race.

What does this even mean?

What will I do without you?

He wanted to deny her worries, but inside, he felt a fiery and overwhelming heat, unable to voice his feelings.

“I’m going now. Take care.”

In the meantime, she emotionlessly turned away. He felt like someone on the opposite side had latched a leash around him, pulling him back. Resisting this unseen force, he struggled to move his body.

It felt as if shackles had been placed on his feet, making it impossible to move forward. The world before his eyes seemed to close in like a dot.

Haven’t I shown you all my feelings?

Jung-oh, who had turned away, suddenly stopped in her tracks.

The cold words she had said to Ji-heon were meant to prompt him to think rationally. Although she confidently told Yeong-mi that she would become “the new family of her son,” she couldn’t truly convince herself.

After today’s encounter, Jung-oh realized she couldn’t get along with Yeong-mi. This fact didn’t faze her, but it could cause pain for Ji-heon.

He probably wished that Jung-oh could get along with Yeong-mi. Even if he believed his choice was correct now and distanced himself from his mother, there might come a time when he would resent Jung-oh for putting a rift between him and her.

That’s why Jung-oh insisted it wasn’t necessary for them to become a family. She wanted to show that there were alternatives that wouldn’t shake everyone up.

But soon, her heart grew heavy. She felt a sense of unease at Ji-heon’s silence. He might be heartbroken, but she feared he might also be in shock.

Turning back, Jung-oh approached Ji-heon again.

He stood there, unable to lift his head, cradling his forehead with one hand, looking pitiful.

“What are you doing? We should go home. Are you not coming?”

From down the alley, a car’s lights flickered. It seemed like it might be coming this way or perhaps turning to leave.

Not wanting him to be left standing in the middle of the alley, Jung-oh retracted her earlier words.

“If I spoke too harshly, I’m sorry. Let’s talk again later. You should go now.”

She thought it would be better to calmly help him understand rather than speaking coldly. But he still didn’t react.

Jung-oh stepped closer and placed her hand on his arm. She felt a trembling like that of a wild animal thrown into a snowy field on a winter night.

“Hey. Ji-heon.”

Slightly startled, Jung-oh tilted her head to examine Ji-heon’s face. His large hand covered his face, obscuring her view of his expression.

Jung-oh raised both hands, firmly cupping Ji-heon’s cheeks and pulling him closer. She felt a warm liquid touch her fingertips. Only then did Jung-oh see his face.

The streetlight flickered precariously, casting a light on his face. His darkened eyes seemed filled with nothing but black fear.

“Oppa.”

A faint beam of light trickled down his cheek.

It seemed as if he had forgotten how to breathe.

Ch103 - The Best Prescription

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Jung-oh draped one of Ji-heon’s arms over her shoulder as they climbed the stairs.

She wouldn’t usually carry her 20kg daughter up the stairs, yet here she was, helping a man who weighed several times more than that.

Strangely enough, though, she didn’t feel overwhelmed. It almost felt like he was pushing her forward, urging her to keep going.

He had complained of dizziness, but was that just an excuse?

Could it be, perhaps, that this was some kind of revenge? If so, he was truly clever!

Regardless, feeling remorseful for the harsh words she had spoken to him outside, Jung-oh moved forward without complaint.

Huff. Huff.

Her ragged breaths filled the narrow, windless staircase of the building. There are moments when one realizes their feelings through actions.

This was exactly one of those moments. Even in the midst of this struggle, she realized just how much she loved Jeong Ji-heon by not abandoning him and working hard to carry him up the stairs.

“Ji-heon, we’re almost there. Just a little bit further.”

As Jung-oh encouraged him, he seemed to move a bit more easily.

Finally, they reached the fourth floor.

Jung-oh pressed the doorbell to their apartment repeatedly.

Hoo-ahh!

Was this how it felt to reach the summit of a mountain?

When the door opened, Guk-soon was surprised to see Ji-heon leaning on Jung-oh's shoulder and exclaimed, "What's going on? Did he drink?"

"No," Jung-oh replied.

"What happened, then…?"

"He said he can't go home because he has a headache."

"If he has a headache, we need to take him to the hospital…"

Guk-soon mumbled, fidgeting anxiously.

"Mother."

At that moment, Ji-heon called out to Guk-soon. Despite his slumped posture, his voice sounded surprisingly steady.

"Yes, Ye-na's dad."

"I'd like to stay over."

Both Jung-oh and Guk-soon's mouths dropped open in shock.

His assertiveness made it sound to them as though he was demanding a room.

"Uh, okay. Do whatever you want, Ye-na's dad."

However, kind-hearted Guk-soon immediately agreed. She felt relieved that Ji-heon had chosen to stay rather than drive home, which would have

worried her even more.

Guk-soon opened her bedroom door and gestured, “Come here. You can sleep here. I’ve made a spot for you.”

“No, I can sleep in the room with Ye-na.”

“Ye-na rolls around, so that won’t work.”

“Then what about the living room…?”

“Just sleep here comfortably.”

“……”

“You can wear these. They’re comfy pants and a t-shirt from the fridge.”

In a daze after unwittingly taking over his mother-in-law’s sleeping space and borrowing her clothes, Ji-heon watched as Guk-soon rearranged the blankets before heading into Jung-oh’s room.

The man who had confidently declared he would stay over just moments ago now looked like a sinner under Guk-soon’s warm hospitality, which struck Jung-oh as a bit amusing. However, she couldn’t shake off the worry she had felt earlier when she saw his face outside the building.

“Just rest for now. Don’t think about anything, just sleep,” she said as she helped Ji-heon into Guk-soon’s room, placing a water bottle beside his head before closing the door.

I guess I’ll sleep in the living room tonight.

Considering going to Ye-na’s room, Jung-oh ultimately spread a blanket in the living room. She was anxious about what might happen to Ji-heon throughout the night.

Panic. If Jung-oh were to name the state she found Ji-heon in, it would be just that. She had never seen him like this before, not even on the day she found out Ye-na was her daughter.

The man who could be cruel to others and seldom showed weakness to her now wore an anxious expression that seemed on the verge of collapsing with just a gentle breeze, which kept Jung-oh awake.

After the lights in the house went out, she tossed and turned for quite some time before finally falling asleep.

About an hour later, she was startled awake by rustling sounds. Sitting up abruptly, Jung-oh blinked her eyes. At her feet sat a large man, resembling a well-trained giant dog, with Guk-soon's bright pants standing out in the darkness.

"Oh, sorry."

Seeing Ji-heon rise slowly with a serious expression, Jung-oh let out a sigh of relief. It seemed he had returned to his usual self. She called out to him as he was about to enter her room.

"Hey, Ji-heon."

"……"

"How are you feeling now? Are you okay?"

"……I'm okay."

He seemed somewhat embarrassed by what had happened just hours ago, answering clumsily.

"What happened? Why did you suddenly act like that?"

Feeling reassured by his response, Jung-oh asked.

Ji-heon cautiously opened his mouth.

"Suddenly, my vision got blurry. It felt like my sight was reduced to just a pinhole…"

He couldn’t bring himself to honestly say that it felt like he was about to suffocate, that the ground seemed to sink and the world was vanishing, and that he was hit by chills that felt like they would cut through his skin.

Seeing her expression, he felt relieved that he hadn’t told her the whole truth. Yet it also felt nice to know that someone cared about him even more than he did himself.

“I’m fine now. It’s nothing.”

“Go to the hospital,” Jung-oh said, her voice trembling with unshed tears.

Knowing roughly what kind of symptoms he was experiencing, Ji-heon responded calmly.

“I’ll feel better after resting.”

“Have you experienced something like this before?”

“Not exactly, but I have had similar experiences.”

“How was it? Was it worse than today?”

Ji-heon found it hard to answer. If his previous experiences had been brief moments of anxiety, today felt more like a panic attack.

Since he didn’t respond, Jung-oh asked another question first.

“Have you been to the hospital? What did they say?”

“They said to rest. They also prescribed some good medication.”

Even though Ji-heon was trying to reassure her, Jung-oh’s expression didn’t relax.

“You weren’t like this before. At least when you were with me, you seemed fine.”

“……”

“Do you think it’s because of the accident seven years ago? Maybe you have some post-traumatic stress?”

That was likely the case. Ji-heon nodded quietly in agreement.

“What about hypnosis therapy? Have you tried it? Should I look into it for you?”

“I’m fine. You don’t have to worry.”

“How can I not worry?”

“The person who worries is you, isn’t it?”

Ji-heon squinted at Jung-oh, and her heart fluttered as if his gaze were a needle.

He knew exactly what she was implying. After boldly telling his mother that he was finally happy, he was now trying to make himself anxious again.

If he had known that her well-meaning words were going to shock him this much, Jung-oh would have kept her mouth shut from the start.

Biting her lips to hide her feelings, she lowered her head.

“Don’t say things like that anymore.”

“……”

“You can’t abandon me.”

That wasn’t what she meant.

It seemed that her words were interpreted by him as having a harsh meaning.

“I have no one but you.”

As he had unconsciously drawn closer, he reached out his hand toward her. The quiet confession in his voice felt so desperate and tender that Jung-oh couldn’t say anything in response.

Ji-heon gently tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, as if handling a delicate glass bowl. She had to suppress her tears that threatened to spill. There were more hidden tears in the pocket of anxiety he had discovered than she had expected.

I love you. More than you know.

Without you, I don’t want to be anything. What should I do now?

“You just have to be here.”

“Why do you think it’s only me? There are plenty of good people around you.”

“Still, for me, all I need is you.”

Even with Jung-oh’s rebuttal, Ji-heon’s heart didn’t waver.

“What about our Ye-na?”

“Ye-na is yours too.”

“How can Ye-na be mine? Ye-na is Ye-na’s own.”

“Right. You are that kind of person…”

That kind of person, someone I love.

It felt like there wouldn’t be enough time to confess his love even if they talked all night.

“If you’re around, Ye-na will follow. Your mother is your soulmate, so she’ll come along too.”

To Ji-heon, Jung-oh was the center of his world. Like a plant that needs sunlight to bloom, he felt that he needed to receive love from her to share the love inside him with anyone else. He relied on Jung-oh even more than she relied on him.

Seeing Ji-heon's answer, Jung-oh smiled, seemingly pleased. Ji-heon finally spoke the words he had wanted to say hours ago.

"You must have been surprised to meet my mother."

"No, not at all. I really wasn't surprised."

"……"

"I think I was actually waiting for her to come."

Jung-oh confessed everything she had discussed with Yeong-mi to Ji-heon.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Early morning.

For some reason, Ye-na was the first to wake up. As soon as she opened her eyes and saw her grandmother's face, she pouted.

"Why is Grandma here? Where's Mom?"

She thought her mother had gone to work, leaving her behind. Guk-soon got up groggily and replied.

"Can't Grandma stay for a bit? How long are you going to sleep only with your mom?"

"I'll sleep with Mom forever!"

Yelling, Ye-na burst through the door and discovered Jung-oh lying in the living room, shaking her awake.

"Mom! Why did you sleep here? I was worried about you!"

Feeling Ye-na’s affectionate complaints melt her heart, Jung-oh smiled sleepily and pulled her daughter into a hug.

“Dad slept in Grandma’s room. So today, everyone has switched rooms.”

“Really?”

She wanted to hug her tighter, but upon hearing Jung-oh’s answer, Ye-na jumped up.

“I need to go see Dad!”

“Dad was sick last night. So let him rest a bit more.”

“Okay, I got it.”

Answering softly, Ye-na tiptoed to Guk-soon’s room.

The cautious behavior didn’t seem to fit her energetic personality.

Jung-oh shook her head, worried about Ye-na.

After discussing things with Jung-oh, Ji-heon, who had fallen asleep late, slowly opened his eyes when he felt a tickle on his hand. A lovely fairy-like girl was quietly moving around in front of him.

So this is what mornings could be like.

Such a morning could exist.

It was a grateful morning for everything that had happened overnight.

The little girl fidgeting beside Ji-heon tilted her head to match his eye level and asked, “Dad, are you really sick?”

“No, I’m not sick.”

Ji-heon replied to her beautiful question with a smile and wrapped the little angel in his arms. Ye-na giggled in his embrace. Their laughter continued

for a long time, and eventually, Ji-heon couldn’t help but laugh out loud too.

A little while later, when Ji-heon came into the living room, the first thing he did was greet Guk-soon.

“Mother, did you sleep well?”

“Yes. Is Ye-na’s dad feeling better now?”

“Yes, thanks to you, I’m fine. I’m really sorry about last night.”

“No, go wash up and have breakfast.”

Guk-soon seemed to be suppressing a big laugh, which made Ji-heon a bit embarrassed. He wondered if his outfit, with the pants of the refrigerator, looked ridiculous or if he had built a nest on his head. While fiddling with his hair, he headed toward the bathroom but paused before opening the door.

There was a sticker stuck to his right wrist. It was a cute little baby angel, just like Ye-na.

As Ji-heon gazed at his arm, Jung-oh came out of the bathroom. She caught sight of the sticker on his wrist and couldn’t help but chuckle.

“That’s a sticker Ye-na loves.”

She turned to Ye-na, who was standing behind her.

“Yee-Na! How could you play a prank on Dad?”

“That’s the fairy of healing. The fairy of healing made Dad better!”

Ye-na, giggling, answered brightly.

“Dad, you’re not sick at all now, right?”

It was a prescription better than any doctor’s.

Ch104 - When the Child Runs to Me

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In Jung-oh’s house bathroom.

The bathroom didn’t have a separate shower, and it took a while for the hot water to come out. As Ji-heon picked up the showerhead to wash himself, he felt stiffness all over his body. After lying in bed for so long, it seemed like his body was sore from it.

While his body felt stiff, his heart was as warm as the hot water now flowing. Ji-heon carefully washed himself, making sure the sticker on his wrist wouldn’t fall off.

When he came out, the comforting smell of seaweed soup was wafting through the house.

“Hurry and come eat, Ye-na’s dad!”

Guk-soon called for Ji-heon. After he responded and sat down at the table, Ye-na moved to sit next to him.

Jung-oh came out of the room and firmly scolded Ye-na.

“Yee-Na, you know you have to eat by yourself in the morning. You know Mom and Dad are busy.”

She had intended to ask her dad to feed her. Now that her true feelings had been revealed to her mom, Ye-na pouted.

However, Ji-heon placed side dishes onto Ye-na’s bowl.

“Ye-na can eat by herself, and Dad can just put the side dishes on. Right?”

At Ji-heon’s kind suggestion, Ye-na nodded her head enthusiastically.

“Hmph. This father-daughter bonding is too sweet from the morning!”

Jung-oh, feeling a bit grumpy, turned to Guk-soon and said in a nasal voice, “Mom, Jung-oh needs side dishes too.”

Watching her thirty-year-old daughter’s cute antics, Guk-soon placed meat side dishes into Jung-oh’s bowl.

“Eat. Eat a lot, our pig.”

“Why am I a pig? Ye-na is a puppy, so why am I a pig? And why give me pig food while calling me a pig?”

Even while complaining, Jung-oh eagerly gobbled up the side dishes that Guk-soon gave her.

Ye-na laughed and explained the situation to Ji-heon.

“Dad, we have nicknames at home. Mom is a pig, and I’m a puppy.”

Even though he had to wait a long time for the hot water to come out, and the house had no elevator and only one bathroom, the first morning spent at Jung-oh’s house felt really nice.

A warm breakfast prepared by his mother, the singing and chattering of a baby bird-like child.

Jung-oh’s affectionate behavior toward her mom, which was rarely seen when they were alone, along with the charisma of her mother, who didn’t change her expression despite such affection.

Everything was fascinating, and Ji-heon’s eyes wandered everywhere. He hoped to adapt to this environment quickly.

Ye-na seemed to enjoy it even more than Ji-heon. After breakfast, she bounced around the house asking if she would be living with Dad now and got scolded by Jung-oh a few times. Ji-heon told Ye-na they should live together soon.

Ye-na didn’t let go of Ji-heon’s hand until she boarded the kindergarten bus.

“Dad, you’ll come again in the evening, right?”

“Of course. I’ll come to see Ye-na.”

“Okay. See you later.”

Waving her hand, Ye-na tugged on Ji-heon’s arm. As Ji-heon bent down, Ye-na put her hands to her mouth. It was a sign for a secret whisper. Ji-heon bent his knees and sat in front of Ye-na.

“If I send a text, you have to send one back. Got it?”

It wasn’t much of a secret, but Ye-na’s voice tickled Ji-heon, making him curl his toes.

“What kind of secret conversation do you have every day?”

After sending Ye-na off, Jung-oh, who had been watching the father-daughter banter, asked, concerned about why her daughter was often avoiding her lately.

“That’s a secret. Why? Are you curious?”

“No, I’m not curious at all!”

When Ji-heon teased her, Jung-oh turned her head away defiantly. Ji-heon wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer.

Unlike yesterday’s anxiety, this morning felt infinitely ticklish and warm. He was almost sad about having to return to his solitary home.

Ji-heon went to work with Jung-oh. After sending her off in front of the office, he felt the awkward glances from the employees he passed as he entered alone.

He thought it would be like this for a while. He had no choice but to wait for time to pass.

However, when he was with Ye-na, time felt too precious, making his heart ache. Ultimately, the time spent with Ye-na was more valuable than his reputation at work, so the discomfort at the office became negligible.

In fact, it seemed that the people around him were more concerned about his well-being. As soon as Seung-kyu saw Ji-heon arrive at the office, he ran over, examining him with keen eyes.

“Are you wearing the same clothes as yesterday?”

“Yeah. I was going to change.”

As Ji-heon pulled out an extra shirt from his drawer, he replied.

“Why do you have the same clothes on?”

“I stayed at Jung-oh’s house.”

“Oh, so does that mean you’re one step closer to living together now?”

“In a way, yes.”

Ji-heon made it easier for Seung-kyu to ask questions by providing the information he was curious about. Seung-kyu cautiously asked with a pounding heart.

“What are your plans for the house? Are you going to find a new one, or are you going to move Jung-oh’s stuff into your house?”

“I was thinking about looking for a house near the neighborhood Jung-oh is living in, but now that my mother has stopped working at the restaurant, I don’t think it matters where.”

“Oh!”

“How about our neighborhood?”

“That sounds good too.”

“Great! The apartments in the complex next door are selling really well. I found out today that there’s a listing for the top floor. Those rooftop apartments are amazing. If you get one there, Ye-na and our Dobin can go to school together, attend the Go academy together, play together often, and go on outings on weekends. That would be wonderful!”

Detecting a positive signal, Seung-kyu excitedly laid out a blueprint for their future. Ji-heon’s brow gradually furrowed.

Ye-na and Dobin attending the same school…

Until now, he had been thankful toward Dobin, but now that he had been recognized as a father by Ye-na, his mindset had shifted a bit.

Dobin really likes Ye-na. He probably likes her too much. He might even say he loves her. Didn’t he once mention that he fell for her at first sight?

While Ji-heon didn’t mind Dobin liking Ye-na, he felt a twinge of disappointment at the thought of Ye-na liking Dobin.

What is this feeling? Is it a father’s instinct not to want to lose his child to another boy?

“Yeah, I’ll think about it.”

Ji-heon responded vaguely.

He didn’t think it would be particularly good for either Ye-na or Dobin to have a crush on each other since they were young. He decided he should subtly caution both of them.

Putting the moving discussion aside for a moment, Ji-heon changed the subject to continue their conversation.

“I have a question. You mentioned hypnosis therapy before, right? Do you know any teachers?”

“I don’t know any personally, but I can look into it. I know quite a few psychiatrists.”

“Okay. Then please find out for me. I’d appreciate it.”

Seung-kyu nodded and squinted, asking, “When I suggested it before, you seemed indifferent. Did your mind change?”

“Jung-oh mentioned it.”

“You listen to Lee Jung-oh quite well, huh?”

“…”

“How interesting. You’ve really grown up, Jung Ji-heon.”

Ji-heon smiled in acknowledgment, finding Seung-kyu’s teasing rather enjoyable.

Seung-kyu looked at Ji-heon with satisfaction, like a proud older brother watching his younger sibling finally act like a person.

As Ji-heon unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt, Seung-kyu’s gaze landed on the strange drawing on his wrist. The combination of Ji-heon and a sticker seemed completely out of place.

“What’s that on your wrist?”

“Oh, this is something Ye-na gave me this morning…”

As if he had been waiting for the question, Ji-heon approached Seung-kyu and showed him the sticker on his wrist.

“Okay, okay, stop! That’s enough!”

As soon as Ji-heon opened his mouth, Seung-kyu covered his ears and turned away in exasperation.

He had asked first.

Feeling disappointed at not being able to brag about it despite his eager anticipation, Ji-heon finished changing his clothes.

After that, Ji-heon left the office.

Driving alone, he headed to his family home. He called Jae-gwang from outside the house. A moment later, he heard Jae-gwang's stern voice.

[We need to go into a meeting now. Just tell me what you need.]

"Have you talked to Mom at all yesterday?"

[No. Your mom is sick in bed.]

It seemed that because she was unwell, there was no opportunity to bring up Jung-oh. After hanging up, Ji-heon sighed quietly.

He hadn't contacted Young-mi separately. He didn't want to. The moment he stepped out the front door, a notification would arrive for Young-mi, so there was no need for separate contact.

Upon checking the notification, Young-mi conveyed to the staff to send Ji-heon to the bedroom.

Yesterday, Young-mi had gone to confront Lee Jung-oh intending to break her spirit but returned greatly angered by a different reaction than before. After that, she couldn't even eat and was groaning in pain. Reflecting on Jung-oh's words left her feeling devastated, and she pretended to be in even more pain.

She hoped her husband would notice her groaning and that he would inform Ji-heon about it. If the two men worried about her, it would somewhat soothe her unjust feelings. So she was also somewhat hopeful about Ji-heon's arrival notification.

She heard footsteps approaching. Young-mi let out a more exaggerated groan.

“Mother.”

After hearing Ji-heon’s voice, Young-mi slowly rose from her place, which had been turned away from the door.

“Yeah. Hello, son.”

It was gratifying that she showed some reaction to the news of her being sick.

“Why did you come when you must be busy? You should be at work.”

Looking at Ji-heon with a proud gaze, Young-mi spoke with difficulty.

“Well, that’s true.”

However, contrary to Young-mi’s affectionate gaze, his eyes were filled with hostility.

“Did you go see Jung-oh?”

“…Did that kid spill everything out?”

It was impossible not to feel a surge of emotion. He had hoped to hear that she had come running out of worry after hearing what his father had said, but it was not what he expected.

Jung-oh’s story came first from Ji-heon’s mouth, as if it were a matter of course. He was displeased that his son, who rarely listened to his requests, would run all the way to his family home because of something the baby’s mother said.

However, Ji-heon didn’t react to his mother’s distorted expression.

“I told you clearly not to visit Jung-oh.”

“…”

“I also said I wouldn’t see you again if you did.”

“…”

“I clearly told you, so why did you do that, Mother?”

How dare you interfere in my life.

A chillingly low voice sliced through Young-mi’s skin like a sharp blade.

Once again, her hands trembled violently, just like yesterday. Now, her son regarded her as nothing more than a subordinate.

“My child, who should have grown up the most precious in the world, has lived without a father for seven years, and his mother has suffered so much. Are you really indifferent to that? Do you truly want to torment Jung-oh like this?”

“Torment him? What nonsense are you talking about? I’m the one who’s been tormented! I was the one who was humiliated by him yesterday…”

“Mother.”

Ji-heon called out to Young-mi in a chilling tone.

That cold voice somehow felt as if it knew the secret of how he had once hired a voice actor to intercept Jung-oh’s calls.

“Mother. Every time the child comes running to me, I have to hold back my tears.”

For just a brief moment, a glimmer of moisture welled up in his eyes.

“You can’t understand that, can you? You’ve never lost a son.”

But soon, his expression grew cold again. His heart, which felt like it had dropped to the floor, flailed like a fish out of water.

The mother did not realize.

That with her own hands, with her own power, she had made it so that no one could love her son. The cruelty of her child, who had sprouted love in the barren land of his emotions when she had nurtured it with blind obsession.

Ji-heon was a son who could abandon his mother at any moment.

“I don’t want to see you anymore, Mother.”

Thick tears that had been hanging in Young-mi’s eyes fell onto the blanket with a soft thud.

How could you! How could you do this to me!

Ch105 - Children Have Secrets Too

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After Ji-heon left, Young-mi truly fell ill.

She never expected her son to act this way. That he would abandon his mother for a woman.

It felt as if the sky had collapsed.

You were my everything.

Throughout Ji-heon’s upbringing, Young-mi felt profoundly lonely. She rarely exchanged more than a few words with her husband in a year, and her stoic son was no different. On top of that, there was her husband’s ex-wife’s son, who looked at her with disdain.

To raise the spirits of these three men, she had spent her life with her shoulders hunched. She had devoted herself to them. From her perspective, that was the case.

All she wished for was the happy marriage of her precious son. She wanted to see him marry a good woman from a good family and live a life of comfort and security.

She merely hoped for a modest future where she could get along with a daughter-in-law who was affectionate and friendly, like a friend or sometimes even like a daughter. That was all her desire amounted to.

Yet that simple dream had crumbled completely due to Jung-oh. Now even her life’s treasure, her child, had turned away. She could not reach out to the child who casually said he never wanted to see her again.

How could you do this to me after everything I've done for you?

Memories flooded Young-mi's mind. The difficult moments, sometimes proud moments, of giving birth and raising her child, the countless emotions she had felt during those times… Even though memories piled up like mountains, the empty future overshadowed everything.

It felt like being left alone in the desert of a pitch-black night.

After finishing a meeting upon receiving a call from Ji-heon, Jae-gwang peeked through the door and entered Young-mi's bedroom.

He had scolded his son for his harsh treatment of his mother, but on the other hand, he could understand Ji-heon. His son needed to establish a new family as soon as possible. When Ji-heon created a new family, there should be no obstacles in his way.

So, it seemed wise to keep a distance from his mother for a while. Ultimately, it was Jae-gwang's responsibility to win back Young-mi's heart.

"Dear. Ji-heon's mother."

"Don't call me that."

"……"

"Tell Ji-heon that I don't even want to live anymore."

"Is it wise to drive such a wedge into your son's heart?"

Jae-gwang's voice turned cautious as his wife was raising her ire. Though they seldom conversed, the balance between them had not been disrupted. It was an unspoken rule established over their thirty-plus years of marriage.

"Ji-heon can never truly leave you. He will come back someday, so don't suffer too much."

"You haven't seen how harshly Ji-heon lashed out at me."

“Ji-heon’s mother.”

Jae-gwang gently tried to comfort Young-mi once more.

“Our granddaughter is really beautiful. She has some resemblance to Ji-heon, and maybe because of that, she seems a bit like you too.”

“……”

“I hope you can pick out clothes with our granddaughter, plant trees and flowers in the garden together, make a swing, and push her all day long. I wish we could clap together watching her do her little tricks, someday.”

“……”

“Let’s do that someday, okay?”

Young-mi turned her back to Jae-gwang, and he could hear her sobbing.

“I’m sorry for leaving you alone all this time.”

“……”

“It was wrong of me to leave you alone every day for the sake of the company, and to ignore the household chores. I was at fault for all of it.”

The sound of Young-mi’s sobbing grew louder.

No matter how much she cried, her son would not return.

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In between meetings, Jung-oh seized the opportunity to do some internet research. He searched about panic attacks, anxiety disorders, and trauma.

It seemed that Jiheon needed psychological therapy right now.

The foundation of all psychological therapy is said to be discovering and expressing emotions. Jeong-o began to think about Jiheon’s emotional state.

Jiheon often looked at others as if he were indifferent to everything in the world. Perhaps he had been trained to maintain a poker face from a young age because of his family's large business.

If this was the result of years of training, there was nothing more to say, but if it meant that some passageway to his emotions had become completely blocked, Jeong-o wanted to help him fix it.

Deep within him, there might be many memories and feelings that lay dormant. Even if he couldn't recall the memories from seven years ago, she wanted to bring his emotions to light.

She hoped to teach him how to own his feelings so that whether joy, sadness, anger, or pleasure, he could express himself honestly.

While reading various materials for quite a while, the phone rang.

"Yes, this is Lee Jeong-o from Production Team 2."

[Jeong-o, please come to my office.]

It was Jiheon's voice.

After leaving just a brief instruction, the call ended abruptly, and Jeong-o sighed in exasperation.

Muttering to herself all the way, Jeong-o entered the office and closed the door behind her, immediately confronting him.

"If you keep calling me like this, I might just quit. Director."

"What?"

Jiheon raised an eyebrow at her shocking warning. He took a heavy step closer to her. Jeong-o felt a sudden chill; she could somewhat read the look in his eyes. She had pushed a button of his.

Taking a step back, she said, "Ah, no, just a joke."

“That’s not okay. Who gave you the right to joke like that?”

However, as she stepped back, he moved twice as close.

“I told you it was a joke.”

“Why make a joke like that? It makes my heart race.”

Actually, my heart is racing even more!

It didn’t take long for the distance between them to vanish.

With Jiheon approaching, it was all too predictable.

As much as she resented the confined space, she couldn’t let him feel uneasy today, just as he had yesterday.

Alright then. If you’re going to do it, do it quickly.

Jeong-o’s eyelids fluttered down. Her lips instinctively moved a little forward. But—

Suddenly.

“Ugh! What are you doing?!”

She had expected a kiss, but it turned out to be a headlock.

Jiheon was indeed an unpredictable man. With his arms around her neck, he started tickling her waist, causing her body to twist involuntarily.

“Ah! Stop it! Stop it!”

No matter how much she twisted, she couldn’t break free. Since they were in an office, she couldn’t yell freely either. Jeong-o writhed in a mix of agony and ticklishness.

“Say you’re sorry. Quickly.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s too easy. It’s not fun.”

“I said it with difficulty. Do you know how hard it is for me to say I’m sorry?”

“Nope. You said it too easily.”

“No! Please believe me.”

“Then that won’t do. You can’t say that to me.”

There was something about his tone that seemed to carry a sense of lingering resentment, prompting Jeong-o to question, “Are you still acting this way because of what I said yesterday?”

“Yes.”

Wow. What a sensitive guy.

She thought everything had been resolved yesterday, but he surprisingly had a timid side.

But that too was a form of emotional expression. With a mindset of comforting a child, Jeong-o decided to play along with Jiheon’s wrestling.

“I swear I won’t go anywhere.”

“I swear. I won’t go anywhere.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I won’t go. I won’t go anywhere.”

“Will you be by my side forever?”

“Yes. I’ll just be here, right?”

“Then sign here.”

“What?”

With Jeong-o still in his embrace, Jiheon clumsily moved toward the table and tapped a document that was mostly obscured, making it impossible to see the content. It seemed he wanted her to sign in the blank space.

“Sign here. It’s a pledge that you won’t go anywhere.”

“Okay, okay. Let me go, and I’ll do it.”

Finally, his grip was released. Jeong-o picked up a pen and pushed aside the papers that obscured the document.

Ah. A marriage registration form.

It was a marriage registration form that only had Jiheon’s signature on it.

“You made such a fuss just to get me to sign this? Did you think I wouldn’t do it?”

Jiheon turned away as if avoiding her question. Jeong-o chuckled and signed the marriage registration form. She wanted to look at it more, but Jiheon quickly snatched it away, seemingly afraid that she might change her mind.

“I haven’t submitted it yet.”

“Why not?”

“I need to get a witness’s signature as well.”

“You can just get the signatures from Deputy Manager Park Seung-kyu or our team members.”

When Jeong-o pressed him, he again didn’t respond. She tilted her head, wondering if there was another issue at play.

After a moment, he said, “Let’s go together next week.”

“…”

“By the way, I’ve drafted the complaint. Read it and let me know if you want to make any changes. Let’s get this done first.”

Jiheon handed her another document that had been covering the marriage registration form. It was a defamation complaint against BJ. Since this was something Jeong-o also needed to take care of, she accepted the document in silence, but she remained puzzled by how quickly Jiheon had changed the subject.

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On Friday, when work finished early, Jeong-o went to pick up Yena and Dobin.

“Mommy!”

“Princess Yena!”

Yena spotted Jeong-o first and ran toward her, followed closely by Dobin.

“Auntie, hello!”

“Hello, Dobin. Today, let’s have dinner and play together at my place with Yena, okay?”

“Yes!”

Having received a lot of help from Jin-seo, she saw this as an opportunity to repay him. Jeong-o got into a taxi with the children.

Dobin, visiting Yena’s house for the first time, looked a bit nervous. Meanwhile, Yena was busy fiddling with her cellphone. Dobin gazed at Yena for a moment and then muttered.

“I want a cellphone too.”

“Just ask for one.”

“I asked my mom to buy me one, but she said no.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t listen.”

“Why don’t you listen to your mom?”

“I do listen, but I just can’t seem to act on it.”

Jeong-o couldn’t help but laugh quietly at Dobin’s explanation. Dobin continued earnestly.

“And you get scolded by your mom all the time. You probably can’t act on it like me.”

“Why do you get scolded all the time?”

“My mom says that me being scolded all day is because of her. She thinks she raised me wrong.”

“If your mom raised you wrong, then she should be the one getting scolded, not you.”

“I don’t really know about that either.”

“……”

“So I’m forgiving her for all the wrongs she did all day. Even if she doesn’t forgive me, I forgive her.”

Oh, this little cutie.

Jeong-o couldn’t hold back her laughter at Dobin’s serious words. As she let out a puff of laughter, she cleared her throat to regain her composure, but Dobin caught her laughing. However, it seemed he didn’t think Jeong-o was laughing at him.

“Auntie, this is a secret. You can’t tell my mom, okay?”

“Okay, I got it, Dobin.”

Jeong-o managed to suppress her laughter and nodded seriously.

Since it wasn’t far, the taxi soon arrived in front of Yena’s house. As Yena got out of the taxi, she was still looking at her cellphone.

It seemed like she was texting her dad, but Jeong-o couldn’t help but wonder what secret conversation was so urgent that she had been smiling while glued to her phone. However, since she had already given a warning, her voice had to become stern.

“Yena, I told you not to look at your phone while walking.”

This was now a punishment. Jeong-o snatched the cellphone from Yena.

“No! My cellphone!”

“I’ll give it back later. Not now.”

“I’ll just hang it around my neck without using it.”

“Still not allowed.”

Yena pouted her lips and cutely pleaded, “Mom, you can’t look at my phone instead, okay?”

Does she really dislike showing it to her mom that much?

The more she did that, the more it made Jeong-o worry.

The only numbers saved in the child’s phone were Jeong-o’s, Guksun’s, Jiheon’s, and Jin-seo’s. If the child saved any other numbers, the mom would receive a notification as well.

‘It’s certain that she’s texting her dad.’

Jeong-o began to think deeply.

She started to wonder what kind of conversations a father and daughter were having.

Ch106 - Feelings of Isolation

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Dobin was absolutely thrilled to visit his girlfriend’s house for the first time.

In a corner of Yena’s room, he spotted a Pororo doll and exclaimed to Yena, “I can be Pororo! Want to see?”

“Yeah!”

“Hello, Yena! I’m Pororo! Isn’t it just like me?”

“I can be Loopy! Pororo, you’re not standing there! Isn’t it just like me?”

“I can be Shinchan too! I’m Jjanggu! Ulaula! Isn’t it just like me?”

“I can sing Elsa’s song! Into the Unknown! Isn’t it just like me?”

Before long, Jeong-o’s house turned into a stage for a voice imitation contest. The kids took turns showcasing the characters they knew, proudly imitating their voices.

Children love to mimic. When prompted, they quickly take turns being Pororo, Loopy, Shinchan, and Elsa. The fun part was that all their voices sounded astonishingly similar.

Although they all sounded the same, they believed they were different. Perhaps because within each child lived Pororo, Loopy, Shinchan, and Elsa.

As Jeong-o watched the kids compete with their voices, the topic of their play shifted rapidly. Dobin ran over holding paper and colored pencils.

“Auntie, draw for me.”

“A drawing? What should I draw?”

“Shinbi, the goblin.”

“Mom, I want to be Geumbi!”

Yena shouted from the side. Jeong-o took the colored pencils from Dobin.

“Since Dobin spoke first, let’s draw for him first.”

It wasn’t difficult to draw the characters shown on the pencil case. Nevertheless, Jeong-o poured her heart into it. Just as she was focusing intently on drawing, the front door opened.

“Dad!”

Jiheon came home after finishing work.

“Dad, draw for me! Mom said she’d draw Shinbi, so you draw Geumbi.”

Yena dashed toward Jiheon, begging him. Jeong-o felt a jolt of anxiety. She wondered if Jiheon would be able to draw properly.

“What’s Geumbi?”

Jiheon asked Jeong-o. She tapped the character on the pencil case.

“Just look and draw.”

Jiheon sat down opposite Jeong-o and picked up the colored pencils.

He should be able to draw if he just looks at it, right? He picked up the pencils without a word, so he must be confident.

Jeong-o felt a mix of anxiety and anticipation as she secretly cast glances at Jiheon.

“Wow! Uncle, are you drawing too?”

“Of course! My dad can do anything!”

Yena boasted, puffing out her chest. Jeong-o became even more anxious. It felt like Jiheon’s drawn circle contained all the ups and downs of life. In fact, she wasn’t sure if what he drew could even be called a circle.

Sure enough, after Jiheon poured his heart into the drawing and handed the completed piece to Yena, her eyes widened as if the world had come crashing down.

“What is this?”

Yena asked seriously. Dobin glanced over and chuckled before promptly closing his mouth again. Even a seven-year-old child can see. She immediately recognized that this was not the character she had in mind.

“What is this?!”

She had discovered the truth. Her dad was the best, a genius, a wizard. She had been so certain that there was nothing her dad couldn’t do, but that belief came crashing down.

How could he ruin my Geumbi like this?

“I asked you to draw Geumbi, Geumbi!”

“It is Geumbi…”

Jiheon replied cautiously, looking sheepish.

He was asked to draw Geumbi, but he ended up drawing a zombie. He couldn’t even manage to look and draw properly. Our Yena’s dad.

“Yena, I’m sorry. How about I read you a story instead?”

“I hate Dad. Dad has no talent.”

Jiheon’s eyes went blank at the child’s factual attack. He became the despised dad for not being able to draw. To be a child’s dad, there were basic qualities one needed to have.

As Yena’s face crumpled and Dobin snickered quietly, Jiheon was in shock when the doorbell rang, and the front door opened again. Jin-seo walked in with Doyun.

“Excuse me.”

“Mommy!”

Dobin recognized his mom right away and ran over to her first. Seeing Jiheon, Jin-seo greeted him warmly.

“Oh, Jiheon! You’re here too!”

“Mom, the uncle who plays baduk draws really poorly.”

While a friendly exchange was supposed to take place, Dobin’s clueless truth-telling embarrassed Jin-seo right away as she entered someone else’s home.

Yena, Dobin, and Doyun played together until late at night before finally parting ways. Jiheon also left after putting Yena to bed, and as usual, Jeong-o followed him out.

Earlier, Jiheon had briefly talked about visiting his family home. He didn’t seem to act like someone who had just severed ties with his family, which made Jeong-o feel uneasy.

“Are you okay?”

“What’s wrong?”

“About your mother.”

The idea of severing ties with a mother was something Jeong-o could hardly even imagine. She felt bad even asking because she could only

imagine how Jiheon felt after going through something so harsh.

He must think about it from time to time, feeling a pain inside him like a splinter lodged somewhere.

“I’m fine.”

“Still, it must hurt.”

“But I really think I did the right thing.”

He answered with a resolute expression, as if he wouldn’t look back on the past. However, it seemed difficult to continue that conversation, so he skillfully changed the subject.

“Seung-kyu mentioned it. He said we should move over there.”

“Yeah, Jin-seo mentioned it today too. It would be nice to raise the kids together in the same neighborhood.”

“What do you think?”

“I think it would be great. Yena likes Dobin.”

“Hm.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like hearing that Yena likes Dobin.”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s nice they like each other instead of hating each other.”

“Dobin doesn’t just like Yena. He loves her.”

“Are you worried that those two little kids might go crazy and decide to get married?”

“Somehow, I think Dobin would.”

Jeong-o couldn’t help but laugh at his serious expression.

He had completely cut off ties with his mother, who opposed his dating and marrying, yet he couldn’t stand to see his daughter with a boyfriend. How could he feel that way?

Well, Dobin was one thing, but thinking about how Jiheon might change when Yena eventually gets a real boyfriend made her a little worried about the future.

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The next day was a lovely Saturday.

However, unexpectedly, Jeong-o found herself with work to do. An advertiser had urgently requested an online ad.

She hadn’t had time to play last week because she helped organize Guksun’s restaurant, so she had planned to have fun this week, but now she felt terrible for having to cancel on Yena.

“What should I do? Yena, I think I have to go to work today.”

“Okay.”

Surprisingly, Yena accepted this calmly, even smiling. Jeong-o felt puzzled.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

Her answer was surprisingly cheerful. Though she felt a bit sad, she thought Yena might be putting on a brave face so as not to worry her mom, so Jeong-o continued to reassure her.

“I’ll come back before it gets late. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay if you’re late.”

“It’s okay if I’m late?”

“Yeah. I’ll play with Dad.”

Ah, so it’s okay for mom to work now that Dad is around.

“Mom, hurry and go. Go work quickly.”

In fact, Yena was urging her to get to the office. Jeong-o stood there, momentarily taken aback.

So she really enjoys playing with Dad that much. Hm.

On one hand, she felt proud and grateful that her daughter didn’t seem sad calling for her mom, but on the other hand, she felt a little lonely.

Now, the two of them seemed like inseparable partners. Every morning and evening, they exchanged secret messages and occasionally whispered to each other.

Although she had never been overly concerned with secrets that others wouldn’t share, the fact that both of them were the people Jeong-o loved most in the world made her feel a slight sense of isolation.

Feeling empty, Jeong-o headed to work. Her team members had also been called in urgently, so none of them had bright expressions. Still, they didn’t slack off. Everyone worked diligently with the intention of finishing quickly and going home.

While she was preoccupied with creating work products, Jeong-o’s phone rang. It was Yena’s number.

“Princess Yena!”

[Mom, we’ve gone out to play!]

Hearing Yena’s bright voice made Jeong-o feel happy too. It seemed they had gone on a picnic with Jiheon.

“Where? Where to?”

[It’s a secret!]

“Another secret?”

Jeong-o felt annoyed that her daughter was teasing her. If they were going to play, they should do it when she was around instead of just the two of them going off to play.

[Curious? I’ll tell you later!]

She felt like she was being tortured. She wanted to finish her work quickly and chase after them, her impatience making her fidgety. However, her merciless daughter ended the call, leaving Jeong-o hanging.

While feeling down, Jeheon also sent a text message. It was 12 o’clock, meaning it was, as always, lunchtime.

– We decided to go to our house today. We might be a bit late, so go home first. See you later.

Jeong-o blinked a few times at the notification.

“So they made plans without telling me, huh?”

Still, since she had wanted to show Yena and Guksun Jeheon’s house, she accepted it without any complaints.

By the time she finished all her work, it was 6 PM. She tried calling Jeheon, but he didn’t answer. The same went for Yena and Guksun. As she was moving around, another text message from Jeheon came through. It was the password for his front door, meaning she should let herself in.

“What on earth are they doing that they’re not reachable…?”

Feeling a bit disgruntled, Jeong-o entered Jeheon’s apartment. After entering the password he had given her, she was confronted with complete darkness.

This space had never been this dark before.

The hallway sensor light didn’t seem to be working, either. Moreover, there was a floral scent wafting from the entrance, perhaps from a diffuser that had been set up to welcome the kids. It wasn’t a bad smell, but with nothing visible in the darkness, it felt vaguely scary.

She regretted entering early and thought she should have just waited outside for Yena and Jeheon to arrive. Just as she contemplated turning back outside, the lights in the hallway came on from below.

The long hallway was decorated with flower beds on both sides. Lights extended down the corridor. Jeong-o blinked several times in confusion. In the blinking moments, tears welled up in her eyes.

On the TV screen, two photos were sparkling and playing on repeat. One was a picture of Jeong-o and Jeheon taken seven years ago at the restaurant “The Crown” in Australia, and the other was a photo of flowers filling the screen.

A pretty garland hung over the flower photo, reading “MARRY ME?” Along the right edge of the photo was a card with the name “TO Jeong-o” written on it.

Jeheon had mentioned before that he had prepared a proposal seven years ago, and that he had found the photo from that time after all these years, with Jeong-o’s name written on it.

Seeing the photo exactly as Jeheon had described, Jeong-o felt a rush of emotions. Her hand instinctively went to her lips.

At that moment, a tall man in a neat suit appeared at the end of the hallway.

From somewhere in the room, the sound of a child’s laughter could be heard.

Was this why the father and son had been so close while preparing all this?

Her lips curved into a happy smile, but her eyes continued to well up with tears.

Ch107 - I Love You Too

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Three hours ago.

After finishing shopping, Jeheon returned home with Yena and Guksun.

“Wow! Dad’s house is so big!”

Yena, visiting Jeheon’s house for the first time, shouted as she rushed inside.

“It’s bigger than the kindergarten gym!”

With wide eyes, she ran around the rooms, shouting.

“Dad! Let’s play hide and seek!”

“Your dad has a lot of things to do. Didn’t you promise to help him?”

Guksun replied to Yena instead of Jeheon.

“Oh right!”

Yena nodded enthusiastically, as if she had just remembered an important fact, but she continued to run around the house shouting.

Jeheon headed to the kitchen with Guksun. They had bought a lot of ingredients and cooking tools, but once they set everything down in the kitchen, Jeheon’s mind went blank.

Guksun, like a general on the battlefield, asked Jeheon, “So, what are you planning to do with these ingredients?”

“Please sit, Mother. I will prepare everything.”

Although his mind was blank, Jeheon answered confidently.

The mission for today was to cook for Jeong-o and entice her with his homemade dishes. It would be the grand finale of his proposal.

“Are you really going to do it all by yourself for three hours?”

“Yes.”

“That’s going to be tough.”

Guksun warned him, but Jeheon smiled back.

“Nowadays, there are great video tutorials that make cooking easier.”

“Still, it won’t be as easy as you think.”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay. Do your best. So what should I do?”

“You can explore the house with Yena and relax.”

“Alright, got it.”

Since Jeheon insisted, Guksun didn’t press him further. However, after an hour had passed and there seemed to be no progress in the preparations, he began to worry.

With all the best equipment, but he’s not able to utilize it…

From what he had observed until now, Jeheon seemed to be embarrassed about accepting help. Guksun asked him again, “Is there nothing I can help you with?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“But you said they would arrive at six. That’s two and a half hours away.”

“It’ll take them some time to get here.”

Even while sweating nervously, Jeheon awkwardly smiled.

He was so eager to cook for his daughter that he couldn’t ignore this feeling. Whatever it took, he wanted to support him from the heart.

Guksun also cleared his mind and turned away.

However, another hour passed, and Jeheon was still making little progress. The video tutorials were too unfamiliar and difficult for a beginner like him. Jeheon finally recognized the reality.

“Mother.”

“Yeah?”

“Please help me…”

“Okay, okay.”

Guksun rolled up his sleeves and approached him.

“I’m trying to make…”

“I know. I can tell just by looking at the ingredients you laid out.”

With a single glance, Guksun quickly figured out what needed to be done first and confidently organized the ingredients.

“It’s not hard to ask for help, you know. But do you know something?”

“…”

“There are people in this world who want to help you and are waiting for you to ask.”

With Guksun’s assistance, the kitchen came alive. Lights were turned on one by one, and the pretty dishes they had bought today were all washed.

While they were busy preparing, the doorbell rang.

“What do we do? Are they already here?”

“No, it’s flowers.”

Jeheon opened the front door.

“Hello, Mr. Jeheon!”

It was Flower Dream, the owner of the flower shop that had helped Jeheon find memories from seven years ago, delivering the flowers personally.

“You came all this way. The flowers are over here.”

Though he felt like he was greeting an old friend, he couldn’t take too long. Jeheon guided the flowers inside.

The flowers were laid out along the straight corridor from the entrance. At the end of the beautiful flower path stood a vibrant floral pillar. The house, which felt somewhat empty with not much decor, had transformed into a lovely wedding venue.

Yena’s mouth dropped open in awe, having never seen so many flowers in her seven years of life.

“Well then, I hope you succeed today. Even if I can’t be here to see it, I’ll support you in spirit!”

The flower shop owner bowed politely, boosting their morale.

With the overwhelming scent of flowers, Guksun, who had come out of the kitchen, was also taken aback and said, “You could start a flower shop!”

Yena burst into laughter at Guksun’s comment.

“If you do that, it’ll take all day! And you’re trying to prepare food too?”

Jeheon chuckled awkwardly while setting up lights behind the flower path.

Watching Jeheon busily moving around, Yena shouted with excitement, “Dad, I’ll make congratulatory balloons for you!”

“Can You Make It by Yourself?”

“Yes! Yena has done all the research!”

Yena had also been looking forward to this day. She had searched for various videos, asked her dad questions, and today, they had gone to the store together to buy everything needed. Now, it was time to create a wonderful masterpiece according to her plan.

“Okay, then let’s do our best, Yena.”

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Ding ding ding.

Everyone tensed at the sound of the door lock being pressed.

In the darkened house, with all the lights turned off, they held their breaths, waiting for Jeong-o to come in.

Finally, the front door opened, and Jeong-o stepped into the dark corridor.

Perhaps because she was nervous from the darkness, a sigh escaped her lips. Jeheon quickly turned on the lights behind the flower path. As Jeong-o stood at the end of the floral arrangement, she looked over to Jeheon.

While she stood there, surprised and frozen, the TV also turned on. As two photos began to rotate on the screen, Jeong-o’s eyes instantly filled with tears. Only then did she realize what was happening.

In the room, the child’s laughter rang out joyfully, adding to the mood. Jeheon stood nervously at the end of the flower path, holding a bouquet, and Jeong-o was left speechless.

“I thought I would never have a day like this.”

Instead of speaking, she slowly walked towards Jeheon.

With every step she took, Jeheon confessed, “I love you, Jeong-o.”

His gentle voice slipped out between his dry, nervous lips.

“Will you…”

Boom!

However, before Jeheon could finish his proposal, an accident occurred. A balloon hung beside the door suddenly popped. The congratulatory balloon that Yena had worked so hard to make had burst.

The balloon represented Yena’s pure heart, filled with her excitement to celebrate her dad’s proposal. She had stuffed the balloon with plenty of colored paper, even though a handful of paper flowers would have sufficed.

Following what she learned from the videos, she also added ribbon tape. In the end, the balloon couldn’t withstand the weight and vibration and burst.

A shower of colorful paper flowers poured out as if it were a concert for a popular singer.

Jeheon, standing right beneath the balloon, went from being the most handsome man in the world just three seconds ago to a decorated human cake covered in paper flowers and ribbon tape.

The sweat he had worked up preparing now stuck to his face with paper stuck all over.

Hehe. Jeong-o burst into laughter while Jeheon closed his eyes tightly.

A lovely act by his beloved child.

Waaah. Inside the room, the sound of the lovely child crying could be heard. It seemed the child was disappointed that things hadn’t gone as planned.

“It’s okay, it’s okay! Don’t worry about that and just finish what you were doing!”

Guksun’s voice could also be heard, trying to soothe the situation.

“Mommy, I’m sorry. Waaaah….”

After the heartfelt apology, the child’s crying stopped.

Through the doorway, Jeheon could see Guksun desperately holding the crying child. He also wanted to go into the room and comfort her.

There’s no reason to cry over this failure. It’s truly amazing that a seven-year-old designed a congratulatory balloon for her mom and dad and made it burst so spectacularly.

Putting off comforting the child for now, Jeheon focused on his role again, shaking off the paper stuck to his body. The room was a mess, and the mood was somewhat broken. However, he felt happier and more overwhelmed than ever.

He felt that he was the luckiest man in the world, with the help of her family to propose to the woman he loved.

It’s okay. Everything is fine.

Life doesn’t always go as planned.

“It’s an unpredictable life, but I can only be grateful.”

If at the end of this chaotic life is you, I will always accept my destiny with gratitude.

“Having you by my side makes me thankful for everything.”

Thank you for coming to me.

“I feel like I can do anything from now on.”

Thank you for bringing me back.

“Let’s keep living like this. Forever.”

The proposal seven years in the making. Words and love he had been saving for this moment.

Now he could express it freely.

“I love you, Jeong-o.”

Jeong-o’s eyes, which had been smiling, filled with tears once again.

Though nearly all memories of seven years ago were faded, his instinct toward Jeong-o remained unchanged. Just like he had waited seven years for this moment, his heart responded to her beautiful eyes, beating fiercely.

“Let’s get married.”

Jeheon took the ring he had pulled from his pocket and slipped it onto Jeong-o’s hand. He had reordered the design he had prepared seven years ago. The ring that had finally found its owner after seven years sparkled beautifully on her delicate hand.

With her voice trembling, Jeong-o managed to say, “Thank you.”

I’m grateful too, for coming back to me.

“I love you too.”

Hearing those words from Jeong-o was the first for Jeheon. He deeply realized that he had also been waiting for this moment.

Before long, Yena had stopped crying and peeked through the door at her mom and dad.

“Grandma, Mommy and Daddy are going to kiss.”

“Why are you watching that? Come here.”

The whispers between grandmother and granddaughter could be heard by Jeong-o and Jeheon, but the two did not let go of each other’s hands.

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Eun-bi had slept for several days straight. With nothing to do, sleep was all that came. There were moments when she felt so angry about how her life had fallen so low that it felt like she might explode, but sleep kept coming.

Perhaps she wanted to avoid everything.

When she was lonely and in pain, a man had stayed by her side, but he hadn’t contacted her, seemingly exhausted by her complaints.

Buzz.

As she stared blankly at the ceiling, her phone vibrated.

She looked down at the phone screen. A local area code was displayed. She remembered receiving a call from the same area yesterday.

It seemed like a prank call. As she considered blocking the number, a desire to let out a stream of curses pushed her to press the answer button.

“Hello.”

On the other end, there was no voice, giving Eun-bi the courage she needed.

“Whatever happens, happens.”

“Don’t prank call me, you piece of trash…”

[Cha Eun-bi.]

But then, a male voice came from the other side of the line. The man knew her name. A chill ran down Eun-bi's spine, and her voice lowered.

"…Who are you?"

[Don't you remember me?] "…"

[You know my voice. You said you remember me.] "…"

[You're the one who sent me to prison, Kim Jin-goo. Don't you remember?]

Eek!

Eun-bi gasped, dropping her phone in shock. The sound of the phone grew louder as it hit the floor. Her hand slipped, and she accidentally pressed the speakerphone button.

[I insisted I wasn't guilty, but you made up false evidence and got me locked up for a year.]

Eun-bi trembled, picking her phone back up.

[Listen well. I won't let you off the hook.]

She had to hang up quickly.

Oh, no! The recording button!

[I'll make you pay the same way.]

While a terrified Eun-bi frantically held her phone and fidgeted, Kim Jin-goo spat out a terrifying threat.

[I'll kill you and Jeong Ji-hyun.]

Ch108 - The Purpose of Marriage

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Seven years ago, the hit-and-run driver who hit Ji-heon constantly denied his wrongdoing. Kim Jin-goo, having a criminal record, was not believed by anyone.

Eun-bi's claims played a significant role in this as well. However, Eun-bi began to doubt her memory on the matter. What if Kim Jin-goo wasn't the real culprit?

Meanwhile, she learned that the police had not collected her dashcam footage. Hopeful, Eun-bi checked the dashcam video. To her surprise, the video briefly captured the face of the perpetrator.

The culprit was wearing the same clothes that Kim Jin-goo had been wearing at the time of the accident. However, it was not Kim Jin-goo.

Eun-bi noticed that Kim Jin-goo had a tattoo on the back of his left hand, but the man in the video did not have that tattoo. It was clear that there was a conspiracy to frame Kim Jin-goo.

However, Eun-bi ultimately could not reveal this fact. The video also briefly showed her fleeing the scene of the accident. It was something Ji-heon and Young-mi could never find out.

Thus, Eun-bi kept the truth of the incident hidden, and Kim Jin-goo ended up being convicted and imprisoned. In the meantime, Ji-heon's health recovered, and Mrs. Jang Young-mi regarded Eun-bi as her savior.

After serving a year in prison, Kim Jin-goo was released but soon committed another crime, receiving a five-year sentence. It was a long time.

Eun-bi completely forgot about Kim Jin-goo.

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A dark night.

Eun-yeob hurried to Eun-bi’s house after receiving a call from her.

“Chae Eun-bi, what happened?”

Bursting through the door, Eun-yeob grabbed his trembling sister, who was curled up in a blanket.

Kim Jin-goo isn’t the hit-and-run driver who injured Ji-heon. The real culprit is still out there.

“Kim Jin-goo said he would kill me.”

Eun-bi spoke with a face twisted in fear.

“Did you record it? Did you record it?”

“…….”

“You should have recorded it! Can’t you do that one thing right?”

“Where was I supposed to find the time for that? Do you know how scared I was?”

Eun-yeob raised his voice, and Eun-bi fired back.

“What’s the real culprit like? Did you see his face clearly?”

“…….”

“You said you had the video file.”

Based on the information he had heard over the phone, Eun-yeob demanded what they needed right away. Eun-bi got up. The dashcam memory card

must be somewhere. It was likely tucked away in a box with old USB drives.

“Ah… it’s not here…”

Eun-bi upturned the box, unable to find the memory card. Eun-yeob joined her in searching for the memory card. But it was nowhere to be found.

“How can you keep something so important so carelessly?”

“…….”

“You’re really useless.”

As usual, Eun-yeob’s criticisms poured down. Still, Eun-bi could not say a word.

“Don’t you remember anything at all?”

“How can I remember something from seven years ago?”

“Was he about the same height as Kim Jin-goo?”

“He was the same height, same build, same clothes. I can barely believe it myself. If it weren’t for that tattoo on Kim Jin-goo’s hand, I would have sworn he was the same guy.”

With a voice tinged with indignation, Eun-bi’s words made Eun-yeob think deeply.

A man who looked just like Kim Jin-goo, driving Kim Jin-goo’s car.

That meant the hit-and-run was undoubtedly a planned crime. Someone had plotted for a long time to frame Kim Jin-goo. If someone would do such a thing…

First, they needed to investigate Kim Jin-goo’s past grievances.

“Listen, Chae Eun-bi. This is a secret between you and me, okay?”

Eun-yeob firmly cautioned Eun-bi.

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The living room, which had been turned upside down by the balloon explosion, had become a playground for Ye-na. Ji-heon momentarily put off cleaning and called everyone to the dining table. The table was filled with dishes that Jung-o favored. Thanks to Ye-na, who diligently relayed information to Ji-heon.

Ji-heon and Jung-o's Evening

Jung-o's eyes widened in surprise as she asked, "Did you do all of this?"

"No, it was my mother…"

Ji-heon's shy response was met with a wave of dismissal from Guk-soon.

"I just helped a little because we were short on time."

Guk-soon tried to shift the praise back to Ji-heon, but Jung-o could guess that Guk-soon had done most of the work. Ji-heon probably just flailed around, just like he did when he first tried to cook seven years ago.

"Mom, Ji-heon cooks well. He may have forgotten everything now, but since he did it seven years ago, he'll learn quickly if you teach him."

"Are you only thinking about making others cook while not thinking of learning yourself?"

"Mom says that being able to eat well is part of fate. Besides, Ji-heon wants to learn how to cook!"

Jung-o's imagination already pictured her mother and son-in-law cooking happily together in the kitchen. Ji-heon, showing no signs of discomfort, supported Jung-o's words.

"I'm happy about it. If my mother teaches me, I'll learn diligently."

“Oh, this is too much pressure.”

Even as she said it was burdensome, a smile stretched across Guk-soon’s lips.

Ye-na wore a happy expression throughout the meal. After finishing her food, she busily ran around, creating a mess in every corner of the house. Jung-o hurried after Ye-na, and Ji-heon’s gaze occasionally lingered on Jung-o as he sat across from Guk-soon, chatting.

Ye-na, having run over after playing a game with her grandmother, settled on Guk-soon’s lap and exclaimed, “Grandma, I want to live here! It’s nice here!”

“Right? Grandma thinks it’s nice, and the kitchen is really great too…”

Guk-soon’s attention was drawn to the spacious kitchen above all. It was as large as the restaurant’s kitchen but not cluttered, which she loved. Cooking in a kitchen like this would surely bring happiness every time.

But this house felt overwhelming.

“It’s really nice, but… looking at the windows makes me a bit dizzy.”

The sight was so dizzying that even looking out the window was a challenge. She had to hold her breath while going up in the elevator because of the nausea.

“I’m sorry, Ye-na’s dad.”

“It’s alright.”

Ji-heon also understood Guk-soon’s difficulties, having heard about them from Jung-o beforehand.

“I’ll try to find a house as soon as possible. I’ve heard there are apartments available next to the Dobin family’s complex. Let’s go check them out tomorrow.”

Ji-heon methodically laid out their plans for the future.

“And on Monday, I plan to register the marriage. We’ll prepare for the wedding afterward.”

“Do we really have to have a wedding?”

With the wedding happening only when the child turned seven, it was bound to attract all sorts of gossip. Concerned about the spotlight falling on Jung-o, Guk-soon cautiously asked.

“We will. We’ll do everything we need to do.”

Ji-heon’s determination was unwavering, without a hint of hesitation. Guk-soon felt relieved hearing such a firm response from her son-in-law.

She believed that Ji-heon would protect Jung-o so that she wouldn’t face any hardships. Meanwhile, Ji-heon’s gaze occasionally turned toward Jung-o.

As they enjoyed the delicious food, tidied up the house, and discussed their future plans, night fell upon them. Jung-o, who had worked over the weekend, also began to feel tired. Ye-na fell asleep in Ji-heon’s arms. Guk-soon got up from her seat.

“I’m feeling a bit sleepy now. You should get some rest. I’ll take Ye-na to the room at the end.”

“No, Mom. I’ll take care of Ye-na…”

“Thank you, Mother.”

As Jung-o tried to take care of Ye-na, Ji-heon bowed respectfully first, making Jung-o glance at him in surprise, feeling as if he had interrupted her.

Ji-heon followed Guk-soon’s instructions and carried the sleeping Ye-na to the last room. After making sure Ye-na was settled in, he calmly conveyed other important matters and politely took his leave.

As soon as Guk-soon mentioned feeling sleepy, everything progressed smoothly. It was as if they had been waiting for this moment.

“Well, good night.”

“Okay. Ye-na’s dad, you worked really hard today. You were wonderful.”

“Thank you.”

“Congratulations to both of you.”

With kind words exchanged, Guk-soon waved her hand. The atmosphere felt as if the wedding had already taken place, causing Jung-o’s cheeks to flush slightly.

While Jung-o waved her hand in a daze, Ji-heon bowed to Guk-soon and carefully closed the door while stepping back. His movements were as skillful and precise as a hotel manager.

Once turned away, he playfully asked, “Are you sick? Your face is red.”

“Uh? No. It’s just…”

“…….”

“Oh, today was really hard for you. You must be very tired.”

“No, not at all.”

“Even if you say that, you’ll probably feel tired later. Once you lie down, sleep will come pouring in.”

“Jung-o.”

“…….”

“I have something to say.”

The Intimate Moment Between Ji-heon and Jung-o

His expression suddenly grew serious, causing her to tense up as well. With a fatigued look, Jung-o's half-closed eyelids shot wide open.

"What is it? …Is it about my mother?"

"……"

"Or is it about Chae Eun-bi?"

"Let's go inside."

Ji-heon grabbed Jung-o's hand. His grip was strong, even though his voice was soft. Following his brisk pace, Jung-o matched his steps, her heart racing just as fast as her feet moved. Soon, their toes reached the bedroom.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and entered the room.

With a soft click, the door closed, and the lights turned on.

"What is it? Hurry up and tell me."

"It's that…"

"Yeah. Yeah. Just say it."

"I love you."

Jung-o's eyes went blank, unsure if she had heard him correctly. The tension in her shoulders melted away, but her gaze sharpened.

"…Are you joking?"

He simply smiled lazily.

"My heart dropped, you know…!"

Before she could finish her sentence, her body floated up before sinking back down. The soft bed sheets enveloped her back, and in front of her stood Ji-heon.

His eyes, which had suddenly taken over her space, showed no signs of fatigue at all. Instead, they sparkled with eagerness, as if to say this was just the beginning.

His gaze savored her like a delicious meal before consuming it. In truth, he had been looking at her like this all day, but she had been too busy chasing after Ye-na to notice.

“I’ve been waiting for this. To lay you down here.”

With his straightforward words, he leaned down. His warm breath brushed against her cheek before trailing along her neck and collarbone. The gentle caress made her squint one eye. Ji-heon’s gaze deepened, enchanted by her beauty.

Since their secret rendezvous in Australia, many things had happened between them. Though their hearts had connected, their bodies had not. It had been a time filled with many challenges.

“What do you think marriage is? Just a co-parenting partnership?”

Every moment spent raising their beautiful child together was precious and happy, but they couldn’t be satisfied just viewing each other as the child’s father and mother.

In front of Guk-soon, he had maintained a composed demeanor, and for Ye-na, he had been the kind father who fulfilled all her requests. But that wasn’t all there was to him. Jeong Ji-heon wasn’t simply a respectable man or a kind one.

“I think it’s this.”

The noble definition of marriage he once held dear now slipped into a more sensual tone along with his voice. It was a claim true to Jeong Ji-heon—provocative yet closer to the essence of the matter. Jung-o found no urge to argue.

His lips, awakening the truth, brushed against her full lips, moving into a territory that no one else dared to touch—one that only Ji-heon was permitted to explore.

As she exhaled the breath she had been holding, a gasp escaped her, and she twisted her body. The man, on edge from her small tremors, lifted his gaze to check her face once more.

Amidst the excitement, he found a strange comfort in this moment.

The way she stirred and drove him crazy felt like salvation for him.

Ch109 - A New Home

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The warmth of his body made her skin tingle everywhere he touched. Just hours ago, her eyes had sparkled with joy from his proposal, but now they were moist for a different reason. Shallow breaths came in quick succession.

His desires piled up against her body. It was certainly a favorable moment for Ji-heon. There was nothing she could do about it. No matter how he teased or tormented her, she couldn’t get angry, run away to another room, or scream.

Without any reservations, without the pressure of time, and free from anyone’s interruption, he held Jung-o tightly.

Still, it grew somewhat intense. Perhaps it was a lingering anxiety that she might leave him one day, or maybe it was odd to feel that way when he was the one who had departed.

Was perfect happiness always accompanied by anxiety? Was it like how the shadows deepen on a hot sunny day?

While the moment was clearly in Ji-heon’s favor, it was merely a physical victory, and as before, he felt overwhelmed by Jung-o.

The sight of her covering her mouth with the back of her hand, stifling her sounds, was maddeningly adorable. It felt like light was swallowing him whole. He was helplessly drawn into it, losing his reason and moving instinctively. He was captivated, going mad.

Still, he wanted to plunge deeper. He even had the foolish wish that this moment would last forever.

Ji-heon promised himself he would remember this feeling for a lifetime. He swore he would never forget it.

With every peak of intense pleasure, Jung-o pressed her lips together as if she had something to say.

But in the end, she couldn’t say it. The never-ending nature of their relationship kept her lips sealed. Overwhelmed by this persistence, Jung-o pouted, and he asked her, “Didn’t you have something to say?”

He asked quickly. Jung-o replied, her heart full of resentment, “I was going to say thank you for today, but now I feel like I can’t thank you at all.”

Her adorable sulking stirred Ji-heon’s heart again.

“This is serious, Jung-o.”

Everything about her served only to provoke him.

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The next day.

A sliver of golden light seeped through the slightly parted blackout curtains. Checking the time, Jung-o sprang up but felt her body ache, so she flopped back down.

Ah, that pretentious Jeong Ji-heon.

In front of Guk-soon and Ye-na, he acted humble, as if he were at the very bottom of the family hierarchy, but whenever they were alone, he always took the lead.

I’ll get my revenge! I won’t forgive you!

Determined, she shuffled into the living room.

“Mom! Mom, you’re last!”

Ye-na, who had been putting together a puzzle, was the first to shout.

“Did you just wake up?”

Guksun lazily asked while sitting in the massage chair. Jihun, who had been sitting next to Yeona, had already gotten up and gone to the kitchen.

On the table, a neat breakfast for one was prepared. It was a soup made with eggs, which Jongoo loved, and sushi rolls.

“I heard you like this. Eat up.”

Squeak squeak. I was going to get my revenge.

Jongoo, with a frustrated expression, picked up a spoon. Everyone in the family knew well that her weakness was her soft heart when it came to food.

Before long, Jihun sat down in front of Jongoo, who had turned her pouty expression into one of joy as she gobbled down the food. With his chin resting on his hand, Jihun watched her lips moving with a satisfied expression and asked,

“Do you want me to make you some herbal medicine?”

“…….”

“You need to build up your strength.”

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After lunch, Jihun took Jongoo, Yeona, and Guksun to Seungkyu’s neighborhood. First, they decided to explore Seungkyu’s recommendations.

Even if it wasn’t the apartment recommended by Seungkyu, it was still a good area to raise a child. In front of the real estate agency recommended by Seungkyu, Jihun met Seungkyu’s family.

“Yeonaaaa!”

As always, Dobin was the first to run over, shouting Yeona’s name loudly. Jinseo and Seungkyu also came over to greet Guksun and Jongoo.

Jihun raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Why are you here too?”

In response to Jihun’s grumpy question, Jongoo answered instead.

“I told them. I said it would be good to come together. You both know this neighborhood well, and Dobin’s mom is thorough.”

“Right. You have to check the house carefully.”

Seungkyu supported Jongoo’s opinion.

In the end, the big family of eight set off to look at houses together. Since Jihun had clear criteria, they ended up exploring Seungkyu’s neighboring area. However, all the houses needed interior repairs, so he wasn’t particularly enthusiastic.

The moment they checked out the property that Seungkyu had mentioned earlier was when their expectations had already dropped after seeing two not-so-great houses.

“Wow!”

As soon as Yeona stepped into the house, she exclaimed. Her reaction was definitely different from the previous houses they had seen. Jongoo and Guksun had similar expressions.

The spacious view, warm sunlight pouring in, and the clean, spacious interior made it a house that even the picky Jihun couldn’t find fault with.

“Isn’t the view nice? It’s not too high, just perfect.”

Jinseo spoke to Guksun.

Jihun felt a suspicious vibe. It seemed like Seungkyu and Jinseo were colluding with the realtor. They probably showed them several bad houses to make them choose this one.

It didn’t quite reach the level of a husband-and-wife scam, but there was a hint of a couple’s scheme. Still, having a friend who was this involved in his business was a good thing, so he couldn’t say anything.

“The owner had planned to live here for a long time and did a complete renovation. But suddenly, they got assigned overseas, so they couldn’t stay long and had to move to the U.S.”

The realtor explained about the house.

“It’s the top floor, but it’s only the seventh floor, so it’s not too high. There are plenty of rooms, and since it’s a duplex, the kids can run around without a problem. There’s also a terrace on the roof. Since it’s vacant, you can move in anytime. Especially, if you come see this veranda here, you can see the elementary school right in front.”

The realtor led Jongoo and Jihun to the kitchen veranda.

“You can even check when the kids go to school.”

The slight smile on Jongoo’s face changed. She was completely enchanted by the view of the elementary school.

The kids were already running around as if it was their own house. Fast-moving Yeona had already climbed the stairs to check out the rooftop terrace and returned to Jihun, hugging him tightly.

“Daddy!”

“Do you like it, Yeona?”

“Yeah! I like it! I love it.”

“What do you like the most?”

“That it’s close to Dobin’s house!”

“……Let’s think about it a bit more.”

Jihun’s lips, which had been pleasantly curled up at Yeona’s cheerful response, slowly turned down. Seungkyu jabbed Jihun in the side again.

“You need to make a decision soon. If it’s such a nice house, it wouldn’t be strange for it to sell by tomorrow.”

There was little disagreement about the fact that the house would sell soon. Jihun decided to change his mind.

“Shall we buy it for now? If we feel it’s not right later, we can always move again.”

A spacious house that was vacant. A house they could move into as soon as possible. In fact, that alone seemed to be enough to satisfy him.

At Jihun’s question, Jongoo smiled brightly.

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Youngmi was still unable to get out of bed. Jaekwang, who had come into the room briefly to comfort her the other day, had not shown his face since then.

Youngmi was starting to feel a bit anxious. She worried that Jaekwang would get fed up with her and leave. Lying down without meeting anyone only deepened her gloom.

“Um, ma’am.”

In the midst of this, a staff member approached Youngmi.

“Attorney Chae Eun-yeob called my number…”

At the mention of Eun-yeob, Youngmi jumped up from her seat. After the paternity test, she had blocked Eun-yeob’s number. Realizing this, Eun-

yeob had contacted a staff member he knew to reach out to Youngmi again.

“Why do you have that scumbag’s number? Delete it immediately!”

“Well, but… he said he absolutely needs to talk to you. It’s an important matter…”

“…….”

“Seven years ago, the hit-and-run driver said he would take revenge… What should we do?”

Upon hearing the employee’s awkward expression and story, Youngmi’s mind became clear. In the end, she picked up the phone and called Eun-yeob.

After a brief ringing, Eun-yeob’s voice came through.

[Finally able to get in touch, Mother.] Youngmi’s stomach turned at the sly voice of Eun-yeob, which she had never known before. She reacted quickly, intending to only hear the necessary details and hang up.

“Kim Jingu has been released from prison?”

[That’s right. He contacted Eunbi directly. Right after his release, he threatened to eliminate our Eunbi.] “…….”

[To think the reward for testifying as a witness would turn out like this. Poor Eunbi. She’s feeling very wronged too.] “If you expected my help, you shouldn’t have done such a thing in the first place.”

Youngmi shouted. Her voice didn’t come out as clearly as she wanted. Not having eaten anything made her feel like someone was pricking her stomach with needles.

Despite Youngmi’s scolding, Eun-yeob showed no sign of remorse.

[I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mother. As Jihun’s friend and your attorney, I was abandoned after trying to help.] “You don’t even realize your

own mistakes. That’s enough. I don’t want to talk to you any longer.”

At that moment, her husband Jaekwang entered the room.

And at the same time, a chilling voice from Eun-yeob came through the receiver.

[Mother, you hired a voice actor seven years ago, right?] Her heart sank. The fingers holding the phone turned white. Jaekwang in front of her and the voice on the phone felt like harbingers of death.

[I happen to be good friends with that voice actor. What a small world.] Eun-yeob’s voice continued to fill the quiet room.

While Youngmi was frozen, shocked by two revelations, Jaekwang stepped forward and took Youngmi’s phone.

Having come to check on his wife’s condition, Jaekwang had overheard Youngmi’s voice from outside the door. Knowing she hadn’t eaten anything, he was concerned about her strength, and the serious tone he heard was troubling.

The content also seemed suspicious. He wondered if his wife was being threatened by someone.

Youngmi immediately reached out for the phone Jaekwang had taken, but he stepped back faster. Jaekwang switched the phone’s volume to speaker mode. Eun-yeob’s voice filled the still room.

[That voice actor friend received a very unusual request from you seven years ago. You asked him to imitate Jihun’s voice and call Jihun’s girlfriend, didn’t you?] Youngmi’s face, which had turned pale, now turned a sickly green.

[The woman you separated from Jihun back then was Jeongoo, right?]
“…….”

[In the end, because of you, Jihun lived for seven years not even knowing about his own child.] In a panic, Youngmi quickly got up from the bed and

snatched the phone from Jaekwang’s hand, turning it off.

The bedroom fell silent again.

But it was already too late. Jaekwang looked at Youngmi with eyes filled with rage.

“What the hell is going on?”

Ch110 - Urgent Request

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“What on earth did I just hear?”

Jaekwang’s fierce voice filled the bedroom.

“You hired a voice actor to separate Jihun from that girl? You did that?”

Youngmi was engulfed in confusion. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

“Why? Why on earth!”

“…….”

“How could you do something like that to someone who already has a child!”

“I didn’t know!”

As Jaekwang pressed her, Youngmi finally managed to speak. Tears welled in her eyes from the deep sense of injustice.

“I didn’t know! She didn’t tell me, that girl!”

You don’t know how I was backstabbed by her. You don’t know how my insides have rotted and festered.

Obsessed with the thought that she had been robbed of her son by Lee Jeongoo, Youngmi still considered herself the victim.

“That’s why I’m doing this. That girl, Jeongoo, gave birth to a child behind our backs. Without our permission!”

“You idiot. You even hired a voice actor to separate them!”

Frustrated, Jaekwang shouted.

If Youngmi didn’t know about Jeongoo’s pregnancy, it wasn’t because Jeongoo hadn’t told her, but because she couldn’t. The Jeongoo Jaekwang met was polite yet assertive. If she had had the chance to say something, she would have told her she was pregnant.

Youngmi’s face flushed with anger as she bit down hard on her lower lip.

“What did you tell the voice actor to say?”

Jaekwang, holding back his rage, asked her calmly.

“What on earth did you say that made her unable to reach out to us for seven years?”

“…….”

“Should I contact Chae Eun-yeob directly to ask?”

It was only when Jaekwang mentioned Eun-yeob that Youngmi burst into tears and began to recount the events from seven years ago.

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The next day at noon. Max Planning, Production Team 2.

Jihun sent a text message.

– Jeongoo! It’s Jeongoo. Let’s go out.

Hearing a joke that teachers used to make back in school from Jeonghun felt fresh and trivial at the same time.

Jeongoo let out a small laugh and stood up from her seat.

During lunchtime, she decided to go to the district office to register their marriage.

The day before, there had been a proposal; yesterday, they signed the contract for the house; and today, they would register their marriage. With major events happening one after another, even someone as stubborn as Lee Jeongoo couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed. Amidst it all, the playful jokes Jihun shared eased her tense mood.

The wait at the district office was long due to the crowd, but the marriage registration process was simple. Once they submitted the prepared documents along with their IDs, it was complete. It was very easy, yet Jihun wore a serious expression as if he were being overly cautious.

After submitting the marriage registration form with the signatures of Seungkyu and Jinseo as witnesses, Jihun asked the staff member.

“When will the processing be completed?”

“You’ll receive a notification text by tomorrow.”

“Can’t it be done today?”

“You’ll need to wait at least one day.”

“What can I do to get it processed today?”

“Are you applying for a newlywed loan?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then what’s the urgent reason for your request?”

What reason? It’s just that he’s feeling anxious.

With cloudy eyes, Jeongoo grabbed Jihun’s arm.

“No, it’s fine. Thank you for your help.”

She greeted the staff member and quickly left the district office with Jihun.

“Why wait a day? There’s really no rush.”

When Jeongoo scolded him, Jihun replied awkwardly.

“I was just asking. I was curious when it would be processed.”

It would take a day to process the marriage registration. One whole day felt like an eternity for someone whose heart was racing with impatience, making one wonder how she had endured these tumultuous days up until now.

Of course, there were many things she decided on her own, but whenever she told him to wait, he had complied without much fuss.

Now that he had shaken off his worries about the marriage registration process, Jihun began to outline their future plans.

“I’ll look for a place where we can have a private wedding. Let’s invite only the guests we really want there and keep it intimate. Or, we could make it extravagant. If there’s anything you want, just let me know, and I’ll make it happen.”

“Okay.”

“And since Yeona won’t like being apart from us, let’s take her and your mom along for our honeymoon. Ask your mom subtly if there are any travel destinations she’s interested in.”

This man seems to think about nothing but their wedding.

“The house is tidy, but I’d like the kitchen to be more functional, and we need to make the stairs and rooftop safe for Yeona. I’ll start renovations tomorrow, and we should be finished by next week. Then we can paint, clean, and move in right away.”

“Alright. Let’s do that.”

Haa.

After laying out the plans in a stream, Jihun let out a relieved sigh. His breath settled gently on her shoulder.

Wrapping his arms around her, he spoke in a calm voice.

“We’re married. We are.”

“Yeah. We’ve become a family.”

Jeongoo placed her hand on his arm, which was wrapped around her.

“If only the marriage registration system completed everything the moment we stepped out of the district office today, that would have been so cool.”

“Is that why you were like that?”

Seeing his silence, it seemed that was indeed the case. The reason he had pressed the staff with questions after submitting the marriage registration form was because of that trivial thought.

It was both amusing and endearing to see Jihun thinking about such insignificant things.

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After lunch, Jihun dropped Jeongoo off at her company and then headed straight to Jaekwang.

Just a month ago, visiting his father felt like a yearly ritual, but now it had become a regular occurrence without any awkwardness.

“Father.”

“Yeah.”

Leaning back in his chair and lost in thought, Jaekwang stood up at Jihun’s call.

“Sit down.”

Jaekwang, speaking in a heavier tone than usual, gestured for Jihun to take a seat on the sofa and sat down opposite him.

“You registered your marriage?”

“Yeah. I went to the district office with Jeongoo during lunch.”

“Good. Congratulations.”

Jaekwang’s expression while congratulating his son was not particularly bright. Jihun didn’t think much of it. He knew well that the cheerful demeanor Jaekwang had shown recently toward Jeongoo and Yeona was not his true nature.

“I heard you found a place to live.”

“Yeah. Yesterday. There was a nice apartment near Seungkyu’s house, so I signed the contract right away.”

“So you’ll be living with your stepmother too?”

“Yeah.”

“Won’t it be uncomfortable?”

“Mother always treats me comfortably. She’s really a great person.”

Now, Jihun had a new mother.

As he listened to his son’s voice, Jaekwang’s face fell slightly.

“Well, as long as you’re happy.”

Jaekwang cautiously sipped his tea, pursing his dry lips. He instinctively felt that telling his son about this would only create more distance between him and his biological mother. In truth, he wished he could keep it hidden forever, but with Cha Eun-yeob in the middle, there was no other option.

“I found out how you ended up separating from Yeona’s mom seven years ago.”

With the marriage and the move ahead, the smile that had gracefully bloomed on his son’s face faded away in an instant.

“Your mother… hired someone…”

Jaekwang continued carefully. His calm voice gradually grew smaller and less confident. This was the first time he had felt so cautious around his son.

Throughout the conversation, Jihun had tightly clenched his hands resting on his knees. The fists on his lap trembled slightly. Though he didn’t shout out in anger, Jaekwang could sense the silent cry in that silence. It had been a tough time for Jaekwang too.

After Jaekwang revealed all the facts, Jihun spoke.

“I didn’t think of Seongwoo, but I had an inkling. I figured it was something your mother orchestrated. But it’s concerning that Cha Eun-yeob knew about it too.”

His voice was surprisingly calm and collected. It seemed the presence of Cha Eun-yeob allowed Jihun to react more rationally.

“How embarrassing.”

“……”

“Your mother isn’t that malicious a person, but she becomes extremely sensitive when it comes to you. Apparently, she didn’t even know she was pregnant.”

“Father.”

Jaekwang’s pitiful words, which could only be seen as excuses to his son, were cut off by Jihun’s call.

“I understand that you want to defend my mother, and that’s enough.”

His father wasn’t the type to turn his back on his mother over such matters. Jaekwang couldn’t deny the years he had spent with her.

Jihun thought that was the logical thing to believe. It felt like the misaligned gears that had been turning crookedly were finally finding their proper place.

I will be my own self. And my mother will be herself.

“I won’t meet my mother again, but you’ll continue to live with her, right? So, I’m fine. I don’t want to worry about her anymore.”

Jaekwang silently kept his mouth shut and stared at the empty teacup for a long time.

His son had his own life.

It took time to accept the well-known facts. After Jaekwang quietly nodded his head, having determined what would keep the peace, he changed the subject.

“By the way, about the guy who hit you with his car seven years ago.”

“Kim Jingu?”

“He’s out of prison now, and apparently, he still holds a grudge against you. He tried to threaten Cha Eun-bi.”

Jaekwang relayed the story that Youngmi had shared with him to Jihun.

“He holds a grudge against Cha Eun-bi, who testified as a witness?”

“It seems he has some grievances of his own. Considering that it’s already been seven years, I suspect he’s trying to extort money from Cha Eun-bi

using that as leverage.”

“……”

“Anyway, take care of yourself. You should also delay the announcement of your marriage registration a bit.”

Jaekwang carefully advised Jihun.

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After receiving the call from Kim Jingu, Eunbi felt nauseous. Even sitting still made her feel like throwing up, and she had lost her appetite. In this state, Eunbi went out to meet Eunyeob.

Once outside, she felt her breath quicken. It felt like someone could jump out from anywhere and strangle her at any moment. With her body stiffened by fear, she arrived at Eunyeob’s office.

Eunyeob was working at her desk. When Eunbi opened the door and entered, Eunyeob glanced at her and then lowered her head back to the pile of documents.

“Why did you call me all the way here?”

Eunyeob handed Eunbi a document. It was a folder with a business card attached. It belonged to someone working at an advertising company that Eunbi recognized.

“I told them about you. You have an interview.”

Though not as renowned as Max Planning, it was still a company with a good reputation. While Eunbi had been lying around blankly, Eunyeob had arranged for her to have a job interview.

Still, it was better than a complete stranger. Eunbi felt a bit emotional at her brother’s consideration.

“Don’t want to work? If you don’t, that’s fine.”

“No, I need to work.”

“……”

“Thank you.”

As she shyly thanked him while fiddling with the documents, Eunyeob abruptly handed her another piece of paper. It was a list containing the backgrounds of unfamiliar men.

“What is this?”

“There’s no option. You have to meet all the men on this list. They’re good people.”

“……”

“The man on the first page is at six o’clock today.”

Eunbi felt taken aback; she had thought he called her just to thank her. Instead, the real reason for calling her to the office was to set her up for matchmaking.

“What? They’re all in their forties.”

After scanning the entire list, Eunbi exclaimed in disbelief. Seeing her reaction, Eunyeob scoffed bitterly.

“Cha Eunbi, are you in a position to be picky? Who would want to take you?”

“……”

“You want to get back at Jeong Jihun too, right? To do that, you need to meet someone even better than him.”

Though she felt a surge of anger inside, Eunbi couldn’t argue with Eunyeob.

“Don’t go like that; get your hair done at a salon. Buy some decent clothes.”

Eunyeob handed her a card as if doing her a favor.

Ch111 - The Butterfly Effect

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After work, Jihun arrived at Jeongho’s house, lost in thought.

What could Kim Jingu possibly feel so wronged about that he still harbored such animosity? He received a one-year sentence for the hit-and-run, and then got five years for a more serious crime afterward, so why was he still so angry after all this time?

‘If he served a longer sentence than expected, it makes sense to be upset.’

But I lost my memory because of that incident.

Jihun couldn’t empathize with Kim Jingu’s anger at all.

“Dad, relax.”

While Jihun was deep in thought, Yeona approached him, observing his face closely. Jihun lifted Yeona onto his lap.

“What’s up?”

“Dad is just sitting here like this.”

Yeona said, pinching Jihun’s brow with her fingertips. It seemed his brow had furrowed while he was lost in serious thought.

Yeona pressed down on the brow that she had just pinched, smoothing it out.

“Dad, relax.”

Where did she learn to say such things?

Yeona, I’m so relaxed because of you that my heart might melt.

The sparkling light gently pushed away the darkness in his mind.

“Yeah, I should relax so that our Yeona doesn’t worry.”

“……”

“It seems like my healing fairy has almost disappeared.”

Jihun smiled gently, showing his wrist. He had tried hard not to erase it, but the durability of the children’s temporary tattoos was short-lived. Now, the healing fairy only remained as a blurred shape.

After looking at Jihun’s wrist, Yeona became quite serious.

“What should we do? Should I buy some stickers and put them back on?”

“Sure.”

“Then Dad should give Yeona some money.”

“How much?”

“Two thousand won.”

Jihun’s response to Yeona’s adorable request came a little late, as the wall around his heart crumbled. When he opened his wallet to check, there were only a few bills inside, and aside from a check, all he had were fifty-thousand won notes.

“I don’t have any money.”

“Dad doesn’t have money?”

“Uh, it seems so. I’m sorry. I’ll prepare it tomorrow.”

“No, I have money in my piggy bank. Yeona has a lot of money.”

“How much is in the piggy bank?”

“About one hundred million?”

Pffft. Jeongho, who had been quietly listening from a distance, burst into laughter first. Even the smartest child still had illusions about money they hadn’t counted yet.

Realizing that her claim didn’t hold, Yeona quickly changed her answer.

“No, about one million?”

This time, she glanced at her mother after making the statement. When Jeongho quietly shook her head, Yeona changed her answer again.

“About one hundred thousand. Anyway, Yeona has saved up a lot of money for her whole life.”

The money that had started as one hundred million had ultimately been reduced to one hundred thousand. To a child, one hundred thousand, one million, or one hundred million all seemed like a lot of money.

“Then I’ll buy it. With one hundred thousand won, I can buy fifty stickers.”

“Are you really going to spend your whole life’s savings on Dad? Is that okay?”

“Of course. It’s only natural. Yeona values Dad more than money.”

With that answer, Yeona dashed to her room to bring back her piggy bank. The rabbit-shaped piggy bank made quite a heavy sound. It was the sound of the money Yeona had saved up in her seven years of life turning into stickers.

“Yeona, Dad is now completely pain-free and relaxed. So we only need one healing fairy.”

Before Yeona could break the rabbit’s neck, Jihun quickly spoke up.

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Drrrrr. Drrrrr.

He was already on his tenth call, but the man didn’t pick up. After repeatedly pressing the call button, Eunbi threw her phone onto the bed and screamed, “Aaaah!” Tears welled up in her eyes.

She went to the blind date as her brother had suggested. The man was a 43-year-old divorcee. It seemed he had dumped black powder over his thinning hair, as black dust fell every time he bowed his head. Eunbi felt nauseous and couldn’t eat.

The divorcee showed interest in Eunbi’s appearance, but when she mentioned her age of thirty, he frowned slightly. He casually remarked that he had never met someone in their thirties before.

Then, with an air of pride, he boasted about his assets: several houses, several buildings, worth billions in total… His overflowing confidence stemmed from his wealth.

He spoke as if he expected her to adapt to his lifestyle simply because he had this much money.

Unable to tolerate the divorcee’s arrogance any longer, Eunbi stood up, claiming she wasn’t feeling well.

Leaving Max Planning felt like falling off a cliff.

Eunyeob had lined up several blind dates with men in their forties who were wealthy. Among them were men with two divorce records and even one with a child.

Receiving such a list only made her miss men even more. She longed for a regular office worker who was young, smart, and handsome—someone who could easily compare to Jeong Ji-heon in looks.

Eunbi suppressed her pride and sent a text message to the man.

– Why haven’t you contacted me?

– I have so many difficult things going on. I feel like I’m going to die. Come comfort me soon.

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After putting Yeona to bed, Jeongho and Jihun stepped outside. Despite it being late at night, the air was humid. Jihun felt like Jeongho was glancing toward the convenience store at the end of the alley, so he firmly warned her.

“Lee Jeong-ho, don’t roam around at night.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re so beautiful that someone might snatch you away.”

“Pff.”

“I’m serious.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Jeongho sighed and responded apathetically.

It was true. Jihun had intended to talk about Kim Jingu but quickly shut his mouth. He couldn’t worry her without any prior investigation.

As Jeongho looked at him skeptically, she said,

“Be careful yourself.”

After parting with Jihun, Jeongho headed straight to the convenience store. Given the hot weather, she desperately craved a beer. She decided she would quickly down a can of beer and then go home to sleep comfortably.

However, she unexpectedly ran into a man outside the convenience store.

“Ah? Officer! Hello!”

“Oh, hello.”

While Jeongho greeted him warmly, Bae Il looked embarrassed and quickly flushed. He was sitting alone in front of the convenience store, drinking soju. The soju bottle was already half-empty.

Jeongho went into the store and came out with a can of beer and some snacks.

“If you only drink soju, you’ll hurt your stomach. The people’s walking stick must be strong!”

“… I’m fine, really.”

Bae Il awkwardly replied and bowed his head.

“Anyway, thank you.”

Jeongho smiled and popped open her beer can. She had initially planned to drink the beer quickly without any snacks, but now that she had a drinking companion, she felt more secure.

And there was something to say to her neighbor.

“Officer, I’m moving.”

“… Oh.”

Once again, Bae Il’s reaction was slow.

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“Yes. I met the child’s father.”

“… So the long-term unresolved case has been resolved.”

At Bae Il’s cautious prediction, Jeongho nodded vigorously.

“What do you feel?”

“It feels good. It’s hard to put into words.”

“….”

“But it’s also scary in a way.”

“Everything will be fine.”

Bae Il spoke in a reassuring voice, uplifting Jeongho’s spirits.

“You’re a strong person, Lee Jeong-ho, so you’ll overcome anything.”

“How do you know whether I’m strong or weak, Officer?”

“Well, I can guess because you raised your child so well.”

Although Jeongho shook her head humbly, she felt good. Bae Il was indeed a man with good public consultation skills.

Adding certainty to his claim, Bae Il opened his mouth again.

“In fact, Yeona resembles me. I didn’t have a father either. It was just my mother and me in this world.”

“Ah….”

“Now it’s different. Yeona has met her father.”

Jeongho’s mouth fell open at Bae Il’s personal story, which she was hearing for the first time. His kind-looking eyes appeared lonely.

“I think I was in a similar situation to yours, Officer. I also grew up without a father.”

Jeongho broke down the wall and confessed her personal story.

“But you know, single-parent families can still be healthy and happy.”

“….”

“Your mother must be very proud of you. Her only son grew up so well, as a wonderful pillar of the people.”

“That’s true. I hope so.”

“….”

“I wasn’t able to see her before I became a police officer.”

Ah. Once again, Jeongho’s lips parted. What was meant to be comforting turned into a reminder of Bae Il’s pain.

Noticing Jeongho’s embarrassment, Bae Il quickly apologized.

“Oh, I talked about something depressing. I’m sorry.”

“No, no. I’m the one who should apologize, Officer.”

Feeling awkward, Jeongho turned her head aside and took a sip of her beer. Perhaps because she had nothing more to say, she emptied the can in just a few gulps. As the alcohol spread within her, her body warmed up, and she felt emboldened.

“Officer, I told you once that living is a struggle.”

Today, she wanted to encourage Officer Kwon Bae Il, who seemed especially lonely and lifeless.

“So your age is a measure of the time you’ve spent overcoming those struggles. You should applaud yourself.”

Jeongho clenched her fist and spoke with vigor.

“I’m sure your mother is proud of you as well.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you. Truly.”

Bae Il smiled gently. His kind expression, in turn, made Jeongho feel comforted.

Noticing that Jeongho’s beer can was empty, Bae Il said,

“You can leave first. I’ll stay a little longer before heading in.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“Of course. Aside from my worries, I’m fine. My unresolved case is still ongoing.”

“Ah… So there are no signs of resolution?”

“I’m not sure how things will go from here.”

Just as Jeongho had opened up about her troubles, Bae Il shared his current concerns.

“You know the butterfly effect, right? The weak flutter of a butterfly’s wings in one village can turn into a typhoon in another region. Depending on how that typhoon develops, the fate of the butterfly that caused it will also be determined.”

As Jeongho rolled her eyes at Bae Il’s profound metaphor, she suddenly said,

“Do you know about that?”

“….”

“I’ve heard that the butterfly in the butterfly effect is actually a cat. When a wingless cat tries its best to fly, all the people in the village help it out, you

know, to build a plane for it. While they were making the plane, a lot of carbon dioxide was emitted in that village. In the end, that turned into a typhoon.”

Bae Il, with his wide eyes focused intently on Jeongho’s quirky yet earnest story, suddenly burst into laughter. His face, filled with concern, seemed to brighten with a genuine smile brought on by Jeongho, who shared in his joy.

“Yeona’s father must be really lucky to have someone as interesting as you, Lee Jeong-ho.”

“Oh, come on, it’s nothing special.”

“Thank you. I hope your move goes well.”

“Yes. I wish you happiness wherever you are.”

Jeongho blessed Bae Il’s future as if it were her final farewell, then departed. Bae Il watched her walk away for a long time before getting up from his seat.

His steps were heavy. The humid weather caused beads of sweat to cling to his clothing.

As he arrived at his empty house, which felt desolate with nothing around, the experiences from outside seemed to fade into a dream.

On the bed, his phone, set to silent all day, lay quietly doing its job.

—Why haven’t you contacted me?

—I’m going through a lot. I feel like I’m dying. Come quickly and comfort me.

Bae Il furrowed his brows at the two text messages for a moment before immediately pressing the delete button. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a can of beer.

Just like Jeongho moments ago, he emptied the beer can in one go. A warm breeze flowed in through the partially opened window. Bae Il leaned against the side.

From the fourth floor of the neighboring building, he caught a glimpse of a living room light turning on and then off again. It seemed like sweat was trickling from his eyes as well.

Ch112 - An Unfamiliar Concern

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Seven years ago.

Jiheon’s body, which had been damaged in a traffic accident, was gradually recovering.

During Jiheon’s time in the hospital, people outside were busy with their lives. Despite this, Seungkyu, Eunbi, and Eunyeob frequently visited his hospital room.

While Jiheon felt a bit frustrated not knowing how close he had been with Eunyeob, he didn’t stop the brother and sister from visiting since they were acquainted with his family.

“My mother asked me to help that punk Kim Jingu live his whole life in prison.”

Eunyeob occasionally updated Jiheon about the perpetrator of the hit-and-run accident, Kim Jingu. Youngmi, who had become a lawyer that year, often sought Eunyeob’s help. It seemed Eunyeob, being quite affable, maintained a good relationship while meeting Youngmi’s needs.

However, Jiheon didn’t have strong feelings about the hit-and-run incident. He thought the wrongdoer should be punished appropriately, and he was concerned that being overly harsh might tarnish his father’s reputation in business.

“But a simple drunk hit-and-run charge won’t lead to a heavy sentence. At most, it’ll be a fine or a few months in prison.”

“…”

“To make him serve more than five years, you’d have to be dead, but since you’re recovering just fine…”

Eunyeob cracked a joke and smiled, but then recoiled when he noticed Jiheon’s expression had hardened.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find a way to get him at least a year in. He’s a real piece of work. With such solid evidence, he’s still trying to deny everything.”

Eunyeob wrapped up the conversation, keeping an eye on Jiheon’s mood.

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Although he had gone to bed early, sleep wouldn’t come. Jiheon found himself lost in thought, recalling his conversation with Eunyeob from seven years ago.

Until now, Jiheon had never met Kim Jingu. He hadn’t even been summoned to court. Having lost his memory, he was in no position to provide any testimony and had only heard news from afar about what was happening with Kim Jingu, knowing nothing about him.

He only had a vague understanding of Kim Jingu’s appearance through photos. In fact, he had forgotten about Kim Jingu entirely for years.

The fact that Kim Jingu, a figure long forgotten to Jiheon, still harbored resentment towards Chae Eunbi weighed heavily on his mind.

If he felt any grievance, there must have been excessive investigation involved. And since Eunyeob had fully cooperated in that investigation, there could have been some foul play.

Chae Eunbi was the kind of person who could do that. Youngmi must have despised Kim Jingu, so Eunbi likely tried hard to please her.

Jiheon felt a desire to meet Kim Jingu at least once. He wanted to understand what his grievances were.

However, if it wasn’t just a matter of grievance but rather a ploy to extort money from Eunbi under the pretense of a bad relationship, then Jiheon thought it would be better to keep his distance. This made it difficult for him to decide what to do.

‘Anyway, it’s best to find out where Kim Jingu is for now.’

Jiheon thought he should hire someone to investigate where Kim Jingu was currently living, and he finally drifted off to sleep.

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The next day.

Jungoh’s phone vibrated every 30 minutes from the morning.

– The marriage registration hasn’t been processed yet.

– Did you get any notification text from the district office? Let me know when it comes.

– I still haven’t received a notification. What’s the problem?

– Is the district office always this slow? Should I go there again?

Worried that Jiheon would annoy her with text messages if she didn’t respond properly, Jungoh sent a reply.

– You saw how crowded the district office was. They must be really busy. Just wait a little.

– How long is a little?

As soon as Jungoh sent her reply, a message came back immediately.

Jung Jiheon. Why don’t you try to work a little more enthusiastically?

It made Jungoh deeply concerned about her future when she realized that the man who was soon to be her husband had no public diligence and only a

personal stubbornness.

– You have to wait at least a day or two. All Koreans wait, so try to be patient, okay?

Just as she sent the reply, her phone vibrated again. Annoyed that her boss was bothering her instead of focusing on work, Jungoh stared at her phone.

– Your application for family relationship registration (marriage) has been completed.

Had Jiheon nagged so much that she too became anxious? It was only natural to receive a notification that the marriage registration was completed after having filed it, yet something about that emotionless message made her heart flutter.

She had become Jiheon’s wife.

Jungoh recalled December 31 seven years ago, the day she boarded the train to Gunsan alone. Sitting right next to her was a happy family with a daughter.

Watching them laugh and chat over trivial matters made Jungoh feel melancholic. She cried a lot inside, thinking she would never have such a family.

It had been so cold then. It felt as if winter would never end, but before she knew it, a child was born, happiness was regained, and several years later, she had formed a loving family.

Honestly, she was happier about Yena having a father, but that didn’t lessen her joy at becoming Jiheon’s wife.

It was just a text message that had arrived, and nothing in the world would change, but it felt like a sturdy pillar had been added over her head.

She turned her head slightly. Jiheon had come out into the hallway. Their eyes met from a distance.

The usually cold and indifferent expression that the director wore as a trademark showed a slight flush of color. Someone who didn’t know him wouldn’t notice, but those who did could easily guess that he was genuinely happy.

Noticing he was approaching without awareness, Jungoh glared at him. Jiheon, having been deterred, walked toward the end of the hallway. Since the matter that worried him had been resolved, he seemed ready to get back to work.

After a while, Deputy Ko Eunju returned to her seat after a meeting and leaned down next to Jungoh to quietly congratulate her.

“Deputy Lee Jungoh. Congratulations.”

“Excuse me?”

“I heard you registered your marriage.”

“Wait, how did you know that…?”

“I heard it from the director.”

“…”

“It seems like you tell everyone you know.”

Of course. Jiheon was not there to work but to brag about this news widely.

The fact that he even told Ko Eunju, who he wasn’t very close to, truly meant that Jiheon was determined to share the news.

Shortly after, Gihoon also came to her desk to offer similar congratulations.

“Deputy, congratulations!”

“Did you hear it from Song Gihoon too?”

“Who told you first? I thought I was the first one to congratulate you.”

Jungoh quietly pointed to Ko Eunju’s desk. Gihoon nodded with a smile and shared the epilogue.

“I was going to gift you a congratulatory bouquet, but the director told me to calm down. He said he’d handle it, so I shouldn’t worry about it.”

“…”

“I was going to give it to you, but the director took the flowers.”

The resignation was evident on Gihoon’s face as he showed her the bouquet he had ordered.

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Even after the marriage registration, their daily lives did not change much. Jiheon continued to go to Jungoh’s house every morning and evening to spend time with Yena and occasionally stopped by their new home to check on the interior progress.

Though busy with work, their days were very peaceful.

Yena was also spending her days quite busily. The Go tournament was approaching. The Go academy teacher said they would send her to gain experience, and while practicing for matches, Yena’s world broadened significantly.

Now, Yena was able to compete comfortably with her second-grade brother who was also participating in the tournament.

Jiheon’s thoughts became more complex as well. He couldn’t gauge Yena’s potential. For now, he could still play at her level, but a day would come when he would inevitably lose to her.

Professional Go players have their prime years, which tend to start at younger and younger ages. Now, the majority of professional Go players are in their early twenties, meaning they all begin at a very young age.

Children who dream of becoming professional Go players sit at the table, adhering to the rules, even during the tumultuous storms of their lives.

They learn loneliness faster than others and grow up quicker than their peers, missing out on the ordinary joys of childhood while their inner selves mature.

Would Yena choose such a life? Would she say she wants to become a Go player someday?

Yena, I hope you don’t grow up too fast.

“Why do you like Go?”

“Just because.”

Although he asked seriously with a lowered voice, the child’s answer held no weight. But it was the most genuine answer. There’s rarely a big reason behind why someone likes something; it’s simply about attraction.

“It’s just fun.”

“Will it still be fun if you lose at the tournament?”

“I don’t know. I’ll let you know if I lose.”

Yena’s confident voice felt like dough being kneaded in Jiheon’s heart. The child’s simplicity, deciding to think about those things when the time came, made Jiheon momentarily set aside his worries and smile.

Suddenly, it was fascinating to think that just a few months ago, I had never contemplated such issues so deeply.

I never imagined that a life once empty and devoid of anything precious could become so vibrantly filled. There could be days when worries about the future and struggles with life feel warm.

In any case, there’s no need to feel anxious about Yena’s future from now on. No matter what she chooses or when she starts, she will do well.

Drrr.

As he looked at the child, the smile that had lingered for a long time faded. Jiheon's phone vibrated briefly. As he pulled out his phone to check the message, his pupils widened.

– Kim Jin-gu has passed away.

Jiheon had secretly sent someone to keep tabs on Kim Jin-gu's whereabouts. He had been cautious about approaching him, as he was even willing to face him, but the counselor delivered unexpected news.

Jiheon immediately stepped outside and called the counselor. The counselor answered the phone right away.

[Yes, sir.] "I received your text and contacted you. What happened?"

[Kim Jin-gu stayed in Pohang before moving to Gyeonggi Province. While I was trying to ascertain his whereabouts again, I learned late that he passed away in the early morning hours.] "…What was the cause of death?"

[It seems he fell to his death after drinking at a fishing spot.] "Are you sure?"

[I heard it from the police.] To leave this world in such an empty manner.

After hanging up the phone, Jiheon searched for recent incidents on his phone. There was an article stating that a body of a man in his thirties had been found in a reservoir in Gyeonggi Province. Rather than feeling relieved that the unsettling Kim Jin-gu was gone, a sense of heaviness filled him.

With a dazed heart, Jiheon's fingers moved to open the email correspondence with the counselor. After three days, his personal email account was piled with spam emails. Among the spam, he saw a familiar name.

'Kim Jin-gu.'

The sender’s name was Kim Jin-gu. And the subject of the email was ‘Jung Jiheon.’

Jiheon opened the email with a sense of tension. The email contained a single line of text.

– Do you think I wouldn’t know you hired someone to track me?

The email, charged with intense emotion, had an attachment—a three-second video clip. It was a photo taken secretly of a moving black car.

The date of sending was July 26 at 7 PM.

Kim Jin-gu’s estimated time of death was July 27 at 1 AM.

Jiheon suddenly thought that Kim Jin-gu might not have died from an accident after all.

Ch113 - Time Travel

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The next day. Jiheon’s office.

“Jung Jiheon.”

Jiheon didn’t hear Seungkyu calling him repeatedly as he was lost in thought about the news the counselor had conveyed the previous day and the subsequent email he had checked.

Jiheon showed the counselor the email Kim Jin-gu had sent before his death. The counselor said he was unaware of it.

He also mentioned that he had never closely followed a subject in such a manner. Since it was far from Jiheon’s request, Jiheon quickly accepted the counselor’s response.

That meant someone else was tracking Kim Jin-gu. And Kim Jin-gu had thought that the pursuer was Jiheon.

But why?

“Hey, Jung Jiheon.”

While he was lost in thought about the complex situation, Seungkyu called out to Jiheon again. Only then did Jiheon turn his head and look at Seungkyu.

“Why are you so out of it?”

“Ah, sorry.”

Jiheon had been the one to bring up that Seungkyu had looked into a hypnosis therapy expert. He felt bad for being preoccupied with other thoughts while his friend was there.

Seungkyu snorted and handed him a piece of paper.

“You can contact this person. A senior from my university became a psychiatrist. He’s the best at counseling among the hypnosis therapy specialists he knows.”

Among Seungkyu’s college friends who majored in psychology, there were quite a few psychological counselors and psychiatrists. Seungkyu introduced Jiheon to the most capable and trustworthy person among them.

“Just go and see how it goes. Don’t feel pressured to continue for my sake; if it doesn’t suit your personality, you can stop anytime.”

“Got it. Thank you so much.”

Jiheon stared blankly at the paper Seungkyu had handed him as he replied.

Could hypnosis really help him recover lost memories? Would he be able to recall the hit-and-run incident caused by Kim Jin-gu?

Honestly, he didn’t have high expectations. But he still held onto the hope that, even if just by a slim chance, if he could recover a few minutes of memory from the three years he lost, it would be a welcome relief.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

When they first signed the lease, the moving day felt like a distant event, but now it was right around the corner. Jung Oh slowly began organizing her belongings. Although they were having a packing service, she needed to identify what to throw away beforehand.

“Oppa, are you just going to sit there? Aren’t you packing?”

Late at night. After putting Yena to bed, Jung Oh asked Jiheon, who was inexplicably sitting beside her instead of going home, with a pout.

If he wasn’t going to help with packing, he should have gone home to rest instead of staring at her with those strange eyes.

Ignoring her complaints, Jiheon finally spoke after a long pause.

“Jung Oh, I have something to say.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“First of all…”

Jiheon’s voice lowered, as if the topic was heavy.

“The call you received seven years ago was arranged by your mother with a voice actor.”

The determined expression on Jung Oh’s face changed as she looked at Jiheon.

“…How did you know that?”

“My father told me. He overheard your mother talking with Chae Eun-yeob.”

“So, Chae Eun-yeob knew about it too?”

“It seems the voice actor hired by your mother knew Chae Eun-yeob. She found out through the voice actor.”

“Wow, that person really has connections,” Jung Oh muttered with a heavy sigh. In truth, she was worried about Jiheon. Thinking about how he must have felt upon discovering that his mother had committed such a terrible act made her heart ache as well.

As if Jiheon was having the same thoughts, he first asked about Jung Oh’s feelings.

“How do you feel?”

“I kind of expected something similar, so I’m not really surprised. How about you?”

“I feel the same way.”

“Still, if it’s weighing on your heart, feel free to talk about it anytime.”

“Got it.”

“Thanks for sharing.”

As he responded to her, his hand moved towards her.

Even seven years ago, he had an unconscious habit of touching her whenever she was nearby. He would sweep her hair away from her face and continue to stroke her head even after moving it. The unintentional gestures made Jung Oh’s heart flutter.

“And what’s the second thing?”

Before the intensity in his gaze deepened, Jung Oh quickly asked. Jiheon withdrew his hand and answered.

“Seungkyu looked into hypnosis therapy. I think I’ll give it a try.”

“Oh, great. I hope it works.”

“Yeah. You’ll come with me, right?”

“Of course.”

Jung Oh readily accepted. She seemed a little excited, which relieved Jiheon.

“I hope you remember something, Oppa.”

Jung Oh expressed a few more heartfelt thoughts.

“But I’m also a bit scared. If your past was more painful than I imagined, then maybe it’s better not to dig it up.”

“Well, even if it was hard, I want to remember everything.”

“…”

“Because you were there back then.”

Hehe. It was a ticklish thing to say, but it made Jung Oh smile contentedly. Jiheon then asked her.

“Is there anything you want to ask me about my past seven years ago?”

“Yes! There is.”

Jung Oh quickly replied.

“I’m curious why you never introduced me to any of your friends.”

“…”

“If I had known Deputy Director Park Seungkyu, we wouldn’t have had to part ways like that.”

“I think I know the reason… okay.”

“And there’s more.”

“…”

“You didn’t like me drinking.”

“Did I really?”

“Yeah. You were fine with it later on, but in the early days of our relationship, you really disliked it. You didn’t openly get angry, but you said we shouldn’t drink together. I want to know why.”

“…”

“And there’s more.”

Curious questions kept flowing one after another. Jung Oh was so excited that she wondered how she had managed to hold these in until now.

“If I hadn’t gotten pregnant, would you still have tried to marry me? Would we have dated for a long time?”

“Should I answer that now?”

At her pure-hearted question, Jiheon opened his mouth. He felt confident that he could answer this one.

“I thought I had been pure until I met you again. I believed that someday I would become a wizard.”

“…”

“Even if it weren’t then, I would have married you. That would mean I’d have a little kid who’s a bit younger than Yena now.”

There’s only one Jung Oh in this world; if you weren’t here, I would have been alone all this time.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

The next day, Jiheon and Jung Oh finished their morning work and went to the counseling clinic.

Since it was a special medical case, Jung Oh entered the consultation room before Jiheon. The doctor spoke with the spouse of the client first to understand the client’s condition and gain clues about the direction of the hypnosis.

The doctor was a man with a kind appearance.

“Hello, Ms. Lee Jung Oh. You are Jeong Jiheon’s spouse, correct?”

“Yes. We were in a romantic relationship seven years ago, and after many ups and downs, we’ve reunited and recently registered our marriage. We have a seven-year-old daughter.”

“So you are the parents of Ms. Jeong Jiheon and Ms. Lee Jung Oh’s daughter?”

“Yes.”

“It seems like you two are destined to be together.”

The doctor spoke softly to help Jung Oh respond comfortably without feeling burdened.

“When you reunited, what was your first impression of Jiheon?”

“We met again as colleagues, and he was very sharp at first. I think he was especially that way toward me. However, despite being sensitive, he also had a kind side. He would call me aside to check in or accompany me to difficult gatherings…”

“That means he paid special attention to you, even without memories.”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever feel that Jiheon acted the same way as he did seven years ago, or that he was holding onto certain memories?”

“It’s about physical touch… It was a bit surprising that the way he expressed affection was the same. Other than that… Ah! I used to live in a studio apartment, and we ran into each other in front of it. It seemed like Jiheon just wandered there aimlessly. And Jiheon’s house has a room decorated similarly to my studio. I had a vague image in my mind, but he said he decorated the room that way because he liked the memory for some reason. I have a photo of that room. Would you like to see it?”

Jung Oh took out her phone and found a picture of Jiheon’s room at the end of the hall. She enlarged the photo to examine it closely, and the doctor said:

“Thank you. If you send it to me, it will be helpful.”

The doctor also carefully gathered detailed information about the day of the accident, the day before, what had happened to Jiheon seven years ago, and the impressions from that time. After a rather long consultation, Jung Oh left the examination room. It was now Jiheon’s turn.

Jiheon was guided into a more comfortable room. After Jiheon entered, Jung Oh went into the room next door. It was structured so that she could see Jiheon’s condition through a glass wall.

“How do you feel right now?”

Following the doctor’s guidance, Jiheon leaned back in the chair and replied. His voice was somewhat tense.

“It’s not bad, but I’m a bit nervous.”

“Let’s relax your shoulders. Move around a bit to loosen up any tight spots and find the most comfortable position.”

The doctor gave Jiheon several instructions to help him relax. After a while, as Jiheon became a little more comfortable, the doctor began asking about various trivial matters, like the temperature of the room, the ambiance, the doctor’s impression, and the doctor’s voice, gradually building a sense of intimacy.

“Your body will relax. Just stay comfortable.”

Eventually, Jiheon closed his eyes.

“There’s nothing to worry about. And Jiheon’s spouse is nearby.”

Relax. Relax. The doctor continued speaking softly to help stabilize Jiheon’s mind.

“When you’re ready, please open your hands and show your palms.”

Jiheon slowly opened his hands. That seemingly simple movement appeared somewhat difficult for him. It seemed like he was battling something within. Yet, he didn’t open his eyes. His hands could move, but he looked like he was in a sleep-like state.

“We’re going to take a time trip back to a long time ago.”

The doctor’s gentle voice continued.

“I’ve just graduated high school. Who is next to me?”

“…My friends.”

“Do you know the names of any of your friends?”

“Jang Hyun-soo, Jo Soo-young, Lee Jae-jeong, Jeong Seong-rok, Lee Chun-gu… Chae Eun-yeob.”

“How do you feel?”

“Relieved.”

“Why do you feel relieved?”

“Because the long entrance exams are over… and I’ve decided to be independent.”

“So you wanted to be independent from home.”

“…”

“Shall we go back home now? Home never changes, right?”

The doctor gradually approached the past.

Jiheon rolled his eyes under his eyelids and remained silent, responding only briefly to the doctor’s questions. He didn’t seem to be in much pain. After a long time, the doctor was able to attempt access to Jiheon’s memories from seven years ago.

The doctor continued by describing the photo he received from Jung Oh.

“Well, now let’s go a bit more recently. I’m in the middle of a room. It’s a very small room with a pastel-colored bed, a wooden desk next to it, and a refrigerator smaller than the desk… It’s my girlfriend’s studio.”

At the mention of his girlfriend’s studio, Jiheon’s fingertips twitched. The previously relaxed expression hardened. The responses to lost memories and retained memories were different right from the start.

His tightly pressed lips parted, and a heavy sigh escaped.

“And in the desk drawer, there’s a pregnancy test.”

Is this a dream?

In his narrow field of vision, he vaguely saw the pregnancy test. Jiheon furrowed his brow deeply. A short answer slipped out.

“…No.”

“Not at all?”

In that moment.

Wuuuk.

Jiheon, who had been swaying, suddenly bent over, making a gagging sound. It felt like his insides were turning upside down, and he suddenly felt like he was about to vomit.

Wuuuk.

“Jeong Jiheon.”

Jung Oh, who had been watching Jiheon from the opposite room, also got up from her seat.

The doctor approached and patted Jiheon’s back.

Though he managed to suppress the urge to vomit, a headache surged. It felt like his breathing was blocked. A chill, like something was slicing through him, washed over him.

His arms and legs trembled, and he curled his back like a shrimp while tightly holding his arms.

“Jeong Jiheon, are you okay? Breathe slowly. Hooou, hooou.”

The doctor tried to calm him, but his body wouldn’t listen.

Though his eyes were wide open, he couldn’t see anything. It felt as if someone was covering his eyes.

“Jung Oh.”

He managed to call out with great difficulty.

“Lee Jung Oh.”

With a voice that sounded like he was gasping for breath, the doctor hurriedly opened the door to the opposite room. Jung Oh rushed over and wrapped her arms around Jiheon’s head. Jiheon clutched Jung Oh’s waist as if he had found something to hold onto at the edge of a cliff.

Huuuh. Huuuh.

It took a long time to calm his breathing.

“Jeong Jiheon?”

The doctor, who was observing closely, asked.

“Have you ever had hypnosis therapy before?”

Though his voice was calm, a somewhat flustered expression briefly crossed his face.

Jiheon’s eyes widened.

Ch114 - If we have a next life

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Jiheon couldn’t answer the doctor’s question and just gasped for breath.

“Jeong Jiheon.”

The doctor approached Jiheon again, but Jiheon flinched and instinctively recoiled. He clung to Jung Oh’s waist, breathing heavily, as if he would fall somewhere if he let go of her.

It was an extreme reaction of hypnosis resistance. It wasn’t just difficult to revive his memories; he was in a state where accessing them was entirely impossible.

Jung Oh froze at Jiheon’s intense reaction. The moment she moved even slightly, he held on tighter.

“Don’t go.”

“…”

“Stay here.”

When Jung Oh hesitated and looked at the doctor, he nodded. First, calming Jiheon was the priority. Jung Oh had no choice but to stand still, held by Jiheon.

After a long wait, Jiheon’s breathing became calmer, and the strength with which he held her loosened. Jung Oh cautiously took a step back from Jiheon.

Even in that moment, Jiheon seemed to reach for her, as if an invisible thread connected them. Jung Oh took his hand. It was a hand devoid of warmth.

“Oppa, are you okay?”

Jung Oh bent her legs and sat in front of him.

With a pale face, Jiheon gradually made eye contact, staring over Jung Oh’s shoulder.

“Should we stop here, or would you like to try a little more?”

The doctor asked carefully. Jiheon didn’t answer, so Jung Oh asked again.

“Should we call it a day?”

“…Yes.”

Jiheon replied in a tightly locked voice.

After a long while, Jiheon finally stood up from the chair. Without saying anything further, he pressed his lips together tightly and bowed to the doctor before leaving the consultation room. He walked as if wearing clothes soaked from falling into the sea, his steps heavy.

Jung Oh also greeted the doctor.

“Doctor, I’ll be leaving now. I’m sorry.”

“Not at all. Let’s have a brief call later. For now, it seems important for the patient’s peace of mind.”

The title “Mr. Jeong Jiheon” had now become “the patient.” Worried about Jiheon’s condition, Jung Oh hurriedly left without talking more with the doctor.

After leaving the consultation room, Jiheon put on his suit jacket and rummaged through his pockets. He needed to contact the driver waiting in

the parking lot.

His phone was in the jacket pocket. The moment he took the phone out, he heard Jung Oh approaching from behind.

“Oppa.”

He wasn’t particularly surprised, but the strength in his fingers slipped away.

Thud.

The phone fell to the floor. Seeing Jiheon freeze again, Jung Oh quickly ran over and picked it up.

“You need to contact the driver, right? I’ll do it.”

Jiheon blankly watched as Jung Oh calmly made the call.

Why?

Why did he feel such a chilling sensation as if he were going to lose her once more right in front of him? He couldn’t understand why such absurd thoughts crossed his mind, and it made him uncomfortable.

Jiheon was led by Jung Oh’s hand as they descended to the first floor. The driver was waiting at the door.

“Are you heading to the company?”

“Yes,” Jung Oh answered the driver’s question.

After a while, once the car was moving, Jiheon finally spoke up.

“Driver.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s go home.”

“To the apartment, right? Understood.”

The driver turned the car in a new direction.

Jung Oh looked back at Jiheon at his decision. He held her hand tightly and stared straight ahead, then gently closed his eyes and leaned back against the seat.

He felt so unwell that it would be difficult to return to the company.

Jung Oh felt distressed as well. She regretted suggesting the hypnosis therapy to Jiheon.

Upon arriving at the apartment, they both got out of the car. Jiheon held onto Jung Oh’s hand tightly while getting out and even when they took the elevator. He didn’t let go of her hand when opening the front door.

Once the front door opened, Jung Oh moved ahead.

“How much did you sleep last night?”

“Just enough.”

“How much is ‘enough’?”

As the questions continued, they reached the bedroom. Jung Oh pulled her hand away from Jiheon first. Just like in the consultation room, Jiheon’s empty hand moved after Jung Oh. However, she was too busy tidying up the bed to notice.

“Just lie down. You need to rest.”

Jung Oh grabbed Jiheon’s arm and forced him to sit on the bed. She helped him lift his legs onto the bed and started unbuttoning his shirt. While she tended to him, Jiheon sat still like a customer at a barber shop.

Once Jung Oh finished unbuttoning his shirt and removed it, she pulled over the blanket she had set aside.

“Even if you can’t sleep, just lie down for a bit. I’m going to get some water…”

Whoosh.

Thud.

She was just about to say she was going to get water. But Jiheon’s strong grip held her fast, pulling her onto the bed in an instant.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“No, I was just going to get some water…”

“You stay here too.”

Jiheon tightened his hold around Jung Oh’s waist and pulled her closer. He gently tucked her slightly disheveled hair behind her ear, casting his gaze in the direction his hand slid.

It seemed like he was about to say something, or perhaps he was just sorting through his thoughts, so Jung Oh remained silent, watching him.

In the meantime, he suddenly pulled her waist again. It was completely unexpected, and Jung Oh flailed her arms as if swimming in the air, being pulled back down again.

Her upper body leaned back, and her back hit the bed sheets. She tried to lay him down, but she ended up taking the spot first. Above her, the man whose shirt was stripped away cast a solid shadow.

Just a moment ago, he had looked drained like a lion that had lost its mane, but somehow, he had regained life and was radiating intense heat. The gap between those states confused her, and a sigh escaped her lips like the breath of a snow-covered day.

You need to rest.

But before she could give any advice, it felt like tears were about to come out. The heavy warmth he exuded was also conveyed to her. It was so sudden that she was left speechless and stammered.

As if responding to her gaping mouth, his lips fell silent along with his ragged breathing. It was an urgent breath, like someone who tangled their own breath yet craved artificial respiration.

Even as their breaths intertwined, his hands moved quickly, unbuttoning many buttons as if to repay the actions she had taken.

After his hands completed their task and retreated, he raised his upper body and spoke.

“As you know.”

“……”

“It’s not that I want to, but I have to.”

It was a unilateral decision. His words stopped there.

Despite the vague quality of his voice, Jung Oh couldn’t refuse.

She still couldn’t understand why he looked like he had lost something. He seemed like he hadn’t yet come out of the hypnotic state.

He resembled a wild animal that didn’t know how to cry, with its emotions trapped inside. Yet he displayed an oddly calm demeanor. Her heart raced at the sight of such contradictions. Jung Oh cautiously reached out her hand, like someone encountering an unknown beast for the first time.

Though she had made a request, deep down she wanted to receive his permission, and that mischievous thought quietly relieved her. Jiheon, having faintly regained a smile, lowered his heated upper body again.

The light filtering through the curtains enveloped her curves. When the marks left on her pale skin settled, a surge of overwhelming joy blossomed amid the accompanying guilt.

Jiheon, unable to grasp the light in his hands, longed for her as if he were a man burning with thirst. For a moment, a feeling of satisfaction that seemed to pin him down turned into a maddening thirst the next.

Jung Oh embraced the weight that pressed down on her, feeling a bit overwhelmed. It should have been a time to worry about him, but her vision spun around.

Occasionally, the unfamiliar aspects of him that she hadn't even recognized seven years ago felt both exhilarating and frightening, yet she thought she could manage it. She embraced him in a way that only Lee Jung Oh could in this world.

When he called out, "Jung Oh," the inside of her eyelids grew hot and damp.

Jung Oh.

Jung Oh. I must have had feelings I was hiding from you.

When you said you were pregnant, I probably felt joy secretly while worrying about you.

Finally being able to bind you to my side.

It was a shameful selfishness. Feelings that shouldn't be revealed to her.

But still, Jiheon wanted to hold her tighter and claim her more, with an insatiable desire. He felt a thirst for things that couldn't go his way. He didn't know how to control it. Even if he did, he wanted to remain ignorant forever.

Unable to do anything about the person already next to him, his insides burned. Perhaps that feeling was a more terrible addiction than love.

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Seung-kyu came down to the first floor of the company, waiting after hearing that Jiheon and Jung Oh had left the counseling center, and

unexpectedly ran into someone. It was Chae Eun-yeop.

Chae Eun-yeop's law firm had recently severed ties with Max Planning, so Seung-kyu couldn't understand why he was still loitering around here. He tried to ignore him, but Eun-yeop stepped closer and spoke.

"It's been a while, Park Seung-kyu."

It had been a while, but his nonchalant attitude was the same. Seung-kyu shot back coldly.

"Why are you loitering around here?"

"Do you think this is only your company?"

"……"

"How do you work with such a narrow mindset?"

Though the truth was unclear, it was possible that he had come looking for another company, since many firms shared a building.

Seung-kyu turned away, inwardly fuming that he couldn't kick Eun-yeop out of the lobby. Jiheon had left with the driver, so he would appear in the first-floor lobby. All he could do was hope not to run into Eun-yeop then.

After taking a few steps, Eun-yeop's voice came again from behind Seung-kyu.

"Parasite-like bastard."

"What?"

"What are you getting so worked up about? As if you've never heard that kind of talk before."

Seung-kyu, reacting, approached again.

“Park Seung-kyu, you’re just getting close because of Jung Ji-heon’s money, right? Don’t you think Jung Ji-heon sees you that way?”

Eun-yeop grinned with a smirk and continued.

“I don’t know how close you were in the army, but Jiheon probably doesn’t even remember. How can he tell whether you pretended to be close when you came to the hospital on purpose? It’s laughable that you’ve become a parasite leeching off of the Seonryeon Group for seven years while pretending to have true friendship.”

Seung-kyu couldn’t contain his anger and grabbed the collar of Eun-yeop. Eun-yeop smiled as if challenging him to hit him. Seung-kyu knew that was his trick. He grimaced and released his grip.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Jiheon’s eyelids were trembling, as if he was in a light sleep. She hoped he wouldn’t feel pain in his dreams, but somehow she was worried that he might be having a nightmare.

Should I wake you up if you’re having a nightmare? No, but that’s also your precious rest, so maybe I should leave you alone.

Loving someone comes with a lot of worries.

Jung Oh found herself lost in thought, recalling the other side of him she had seen in the counseling room today.

Is it possible that your depths hold not only memories of loving me but also the pain of leaving me behind?

After watching for a while, Jung Oh got up and went to the living room to contact the doctor. The doctor spoke in a serious tone.

[It seems there is considerable trauma from the accident seven years ago. The shock from that time might be blocking the recovery process.] “……”

[The fact that there’s a reaction to the past is a positive sign. However, I think treatment should come before trying to retrieve those memories.] “Yes, I think so too. If the process of recalling those memories is this painful, it might be better not to do it.”

Jung Oh cautiously shared her thoughts.

[It would be quite difficult like this. But even if I’m not there, treatment is essential.] “……”

[Still, I’m glad that Jung Oh is relying on you a lot. Please continue to support him.] “What should I do now?”

[Talk to him a lot. Make him laugh, and help him feel comfortable. It would also be good to show Jung Ji-heon your honest feelings. For now, that alone will have a positive impact on him.] The doctor kindly gave the advice that Jung Oh and Jiheon needed right now before hanging up. After the call, Jung Oh returned to the bedroom.

By then, Jiheon had woken up and was sitting on the bed. His slightly anxious gaze settled upon seeing Jung Oh’s face.

“Why are you awake? Go back to sleep.”

“Come here too.”

As Jung Oh sat on the edge of the bed, Jiheon pulled her waist closer.

“No, I have to go see Yena.”

“Oh, right.”

“No. You can lie down.”

As he attempted to get up with his heavy body, Jung Oh stopped him.

“You’ve had a tough time.”

She wanted him to rest for now.

“Jung Ji-heon.”

“……”

“I love you.”

Jiheon froze at the sudden confession amidst the stillness. Should she say his heart throbbed?

……So this is how it feels.

This was the first time she had said “I love you” first.

“Say it again.”

“I love you.”

“……Again.”

“I love you.”

She continued the confession, as if she could give him whatever he wanted. It felt like the soot stuck in her body was being washed away by the refreshing confession. Jiheon held her waist tightly, trying hard not to show tears.

So this is what it means to say “I love you.” So this is what gratitude feels like.

“Say it again.”

“I love you. Oppa.”

With each confession, she wanted to add, “Thank you for loving me.” But Jiheon, filled with tension, took only what he wanted. It was fascinating that love returned to him, as if it were originally his, without needing to express gratitude or reciprocate.

Am I still in a dream?

Having you by my side still feels like a dream.

Jung Oh.

Thank you for loving me.

If there’s a next life for us, I hope I can remember you this time. I don’t want to forget anymore. Now let me remember you. I will come to you.

Ch115 - Don't Cry Anymore

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Eun-bi visited her brother’s company again. Despite hearing the news of Kim Jin-gu’s death, she felt uneasy as she looked around. Her churning stomach didn’t seem to settle.

Upon opening the door to Eun-yeop’s office, she found him grimacing.

“Is this your playground?”

Eun-yeop yelled angrily and got up from his seat. Since his sister had come to see him in person, he added some scolding.

“Do you have any idea how hard I worked to set that up? What are you going to do if you ruin that place?”

He was referring to the arranged meeting that Eun-bi had abruptly left.

“I wasn’t feeling well.”

“You should have taken medicine and endured. Do you even know what kind of meeting that was? You can’t see that person anymore if you wanted to.”

“Oppa, they said Kim Jin-gu is dead.”

Eun-bi couldn’t wait for Eun-yeop’s nagging to end and blurted out what she had heard from the police.

Eun-yeop’s previously crumpled face froze in place. He looked like he was about to scold her for ten minutes, but he completely lost his voice. Eun-bi

found that reaction even more chilling.

“…Do you know too?”

“How did you find out?”

“The police called me. They contacted me because my number was written in Kim Jin-gu’s notebook.”

“……”

“I’m scared. …You’re not involved in this, are you?”

“If you’re going to spout nonsense, get out. I have a guest coming.”

“Then answer me. Is it really not related to you?”

At that moment, with a squeak, the door opened.

“…Attorney Choi?”

A middle-aged man peeked in, looking for Eun-yeop. The harsh expression on Eun-yeop’s face instantly smoothed out. He straightened up and fastened the buttons on his suit jacket.

“Hello, sir.”

Eun-bi turned her head and was startled. He was the man in the photo that her brother had shown her. Although his hair was whiter than in the picture, it was still him.

“Eun-bi, say hello. This is Ham Dae-geun, the CEO of Daegun Materials.”

Eun-yeop’s voice softened.

“…Hello.”

“CEO. This is my sister, Chae Eun-bi. She’s a very talented copywriter.”

“Oh, I see.”

The man revealed a smile that showed several gold teeth. Eun-bi felt scared and could no longer stay.

“I’ll be leaving first.”

As Eun-bi fled, Ham Dae-geun watched her with greedy eyes.

“Your sister is quite the beauty.”

“That’s my pride. I’ve been hiding her away, not wanting to introduce her to anyone. You’ll be seeing her again soon, so please take good care of my sister.”

“Ha ha. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Dae-geun awkwardly scratched the back of his head and looked around. It was his first time visiting a lawyer’s office. The bookshelves were packed not only with legal texts but also with various other books. Glancing at the bottom shelf, Dae-geun asked,

“Are you interested in hypnosis, Attorney?”

“Lawyers need to persuade people. The art of persuasion is essentially the same as hypnosis,” the lawyer replied.

“That’s true. You make a good point.”

Seeing Dae-geun nod, Eun-yeop smiled politely.

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Nine years ago, Eun-yeop heard that Jeong Ji-heon was going to enlist in the military.

Ji-heon was someone who lived life carelessly, never letting anyone close and even had a bit of obsessive-compulsive disorder, so Eun-yeop secretly laughed at the idea that he was suddenly going to the army.

Eun-yeop's father encouraged him to enlist alongside Ji-heon, but Eun-yeop had no desire to do that. Ji-heon was a friend he could easily take advantage of, but he wasn't valuable enough to follow into the military.

Moreover, Eun-yeop firmly believed that even if Ji-heon went to the army, he would come back unable to endure it after about two months.

However, contrary to Eun-yeop's expectations, Ji-heon managed to do well in the military. After his discharge, he had changed a bit. He had made a new friend.

Eun-yeop knew this friend. Park Seung-kyu.

Eun-yeop had been classmates with Park Seung-kyu in high school, and they had been in the same class once.

Eun-yeop didn't particularly like Park Seung-kyu. He was an ordinary kid who came from a typical family and had nothing to boast about. His studies were decent, but he wasn't exceptional like Eun-yeop.

Eun-yeop had always looked down on him, but now this ordinary kid was clinging to Ji-heon. They were high school and college mates and had the title of senior and junior from the army.

Park Seung-kyu had managed to charm Ji-heon so well that Ji-heon showed expressions to him that he had never displayed to Eun-yeop.

The guy who always responded coldly and built walls around himself would initiate conversations with Park Seung-kyu like a true friend and genuinely laugh at his jokes. Eun-yeop even heard that Ji-heon had gone on a solo backpacking trip abroad on Park Seung-kyu's recommendation.

Eun-yeop regretted not enlisting alongside Ji-heon due to his father's encouragement, but there was nothing he could do. After that, Eun-yeop did his best to win Ji-heon's heart back and restore their friendship.

He read self-help books on relationship skills, moving people's hearts, and techniques in socializing and persuasion, voraciously.

Eun-yeop was genuinely sincere. Even after passing the bar exam and being busier than ever, he tried hard to find out about Ji-heon's private gatherings and attended them.

One day, he learned that Ji-heon had shown up at a high school reunion.

When Eun-yeop arrived at the bar late, the party was already in full swing. Ji-heon's face was flushed, as it seemed he had drunk quite a bit, while Seung-kyu was teasing him, recording with his phone camera.

"Jeong Ji-heon. What's going on?"

"Cut it out."

"Don't just drink; say something. Why are you in such a good mood? It's suspicious."

"Stop filming!"

Despite Ji-heon's pleas to stop, he couldn't help but smile at Seung-kyu, who was holding the camera.

It was a sight Eun-yeop had never seen before, no, one he had never even imagined. The last time he had suggested taking a picture, Ji-heon had blocked the lens with his hand.

And now, this was Ji-heon.

Eun-yeop snatched Seung-kyu's phone and pressed the stop button on the recording.

"Ji-heon said to stop."

The atmosphere in the bar chilled momentarily at Eun-yeop's intervention. Seung-kyu awkwardly took the phone back from Eun-yeop, and Ji-heon chuckled at him. It was evident how close the two had grown just from that brief moment.

Eun-yeop squeezed into the group of friends and sat down in front of Ji-heon.

“Jeong Ji-heon, it’s been a while. Why have you been so busy?”

“You’re the one who’s busy. I heard you became a lawyer. Congratulations.”

Ji-heon congratulated Eun-yeop, and soon, the atmosphere around them filled with more congratulations.

While it felt nice to be in a situation where he could show off, that wasn’t Eun-yeop’s goal today. He humbly deflected the congratulations from the other unimpressive friends and turned to Ji-heon.

“I heard you went to Australia. Did you enjoy it?”

“Yeah.”

“Your expression seems a lot brighter these days. Did you get a girlfriend or something?”

This was merely an attempt to bridge the gap that had formed between them, but Ji-heon didn’t even provide a short response.

Eun-yeop couldn’t tell if he was hesitating or simply ignoring the question. He clenched his fists under the table, waiting for Ji-heon’s answer.

“No.”

The answer came out very late. Eun-yeop nodded and brought up a topic only they would understand.

“Your dad must be really busy, right? I heard the business expansion into Vietnam is going well. My dad mentioned he connected you with someone.”

But in the midst of this, Park Seung-kyu interjected.

“Why are you bringing up something only you know in this atmosphere?”

Seung-kyu draped his arm over Ji-heon’s shoulder, looking at Eun-yeop with a somewhat sullen expression. He didn’t seem to have any malicious intent, but there was an innate annoying quality to him.

As time passed, Ji-heon was the first to stand up. Seung-kyu said he would see him to the front of the store and got up with him. Of course, Eun-yeop followed.

Without incident, as if they would meet again tomorrow, Seung-kyu and Ji-heon exchanged goodbyes, causing Eun-yeop to feel anxious. After Ji-heon left, Eun-yeop mocked Seung-kyu.

“You really hit the jackpot, huh?”

“What are you talking about?”

Seung-kyu replied.

“Isn’t it obvious? Even if your classmate who came in as your junior was from a poor family, you would have taken care of him, right? There must have been some calculation involved.”

As Eun-yeop pinpointed this, Seung-kyu stared at him with wide eyes.

“You met Ji-heon as a junior in the army, so maybe you struck gold in a past life. You really hit the jackpot.”

“Chae Eun-yeop, do you see your friend as a jackpot?”

With eyes red from drinking, Seung-kyu asked with a hazy gaze.

“I’m not that close to you, so I can’t just speak carelessly to Ji-heon. But saying stuff like that, that’s really low.”

“……”

“If you’re jealous because I seem close to Ji-heon, then I can understand, but don’t say things like that elsewhere. It’ll hurt your standing.”

Given how drunk he was, it would have been easy for emotions to flare up, but Seung-kyu turned away without a single act of violence. He returned to his seat and resumed making childish jokes with his friends, laughing as if nothing had happened.

He had a demeanor that refused to be swept away, acting rationally without calculation.

He was too proper a friend. Too upright and bright to be by Ji-heon’s side.

Ji-heon and that family should be mine, yet I already had a ten-year plan in my head to manipulate and control Ji-heon. Eun-yeop felt increasingly anxious.

Though he was restless, Eun-yeop was also busy with work and couldn’t contact Ji-heon frequently. It felt like Ji-heon was avoiding him.

As months passed, he received a call from his younger sister, Chae Eun-bi, who was studying abroad in the United States. Eun-bi informed him that she had passed the transfer exam to K University, where Ji-heon was attending. Eun-yeop felt a renewed sense of hope.

His sister had liked Ji-heon since she was young. Preparing for the transfer to K University must have been a way to get closer to him.

Eun-yeop arranged for Eun-bi to stay in Ji-heon’s officetel. By an unexpected coincidence, Eun-bi witnessed Ji-heon’s accident, leading to a dramatic reunion. It was a fortunate opportunity that could only be attributed to fate.

While Ji-heon lay in a VIP hospital room, unable to wake up, Eun-bi, Eun-yeop, and Seung-kyu busily came and went from the room.

In the midst of this, Eun-yeop keenly observed the brainwave activation monitoring device attached to Ji-heon. Monitoring Ji-heon’s brainwaves,

Eun-yeop realized that he was in a deep sleep.

Suddenly, a line from a documentary about a scam artist came to mind.

[Anyone can be hypnotized. Whether through self-suggestion or the art of captivating others, in the end, it can all be considered hypnosis.]

Eun-yeop read numerous papers and devoured specialized books. He even sought out experts to learn skills and practiced what he learned from women he met in bars.

He was surprised himself. He never thought hypnosis could be this easy. He could understand how weak people might fall into religious cults or multi-level marketing schemes.

Eun-yeop visited Ji-heon's hospital room every day. At first, he didn't have high expectations. He approached it with a mindset of, "I have nothing to lose." But as he gradually honed his skills, he began to hope for the future.

"Ji-heon, I'll save you."

In the empty hospital room, Eun-yeop took Ji-heon's hand and spoke slowly.

"I'll treat you. Trust me. You'll be comfortable now."

He whispered discreetly in his ear.

"Now the pain will disappear, and your body will feel at ease."

Every time he felt Ji-heon's fingertips twitch, Eun-yeop's heart raced madly.

"Start by erasing your closest memories one by one. Like lighting a match to burn your brain. Everything in the path of the flame will vanish. Memories of trips, memories of the military, memories of meeting new people. Set fire to all your memories. …Because they're memories I don't need. They're useless memories."

I might be wasting my time right now. But if it works, I could gain something truly incredible.

“I haven’t done anything useful for a long time. You have to keep repeating it in your mind. You have to burn it all away.”

As Eun-yeop gently whispered in Ji-heon’s ear, he suddenly straightened up.

The hospital room door was slightly open.

Why is the door open? I’m sure I closed it.

Eun-yeop wondered as he stood up, closed the door, and returned to his seat.

“…Twenty-six, twenty-five, twenty-four… All the time has disappeared. Erase all memories.”

Ji-heon frowned deeply. He was reacting. The light in Eun-yeop’s eyes sparkled with a greed close to madness. It felt like the hot blood inside him was racing, as if he had drunk strong alcohol.

“Now I am empty. When I open my eyes, I won’t know anything. I’m just Jeong Ji-heon. The comfortable Jeong Ji-heon living the life that my family has arranged for me.”

He couldn’t contain his joy, and his voice trembled.

He had worked up quite a sweat trying to speak calmly.

“It’s the perfect age to start a new life. A comfortable life with no lingering regrets about what has been lost.”

He saw tears welling up in Ji-heon’s eyes.

It’s your fault, Ji-heon.

If you had only respected me a little less, I wouldn’t be like this.

“Don’t cry anymore, Ji-heon. I’ll help you.”

Eun-yeop pressed a tissue against those tears.

“So believe what I say.”

Ch116 - The Uncle Will Remember You

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Jeong-oh came out of the house holding Ji-heon’s hand.

The strong hand that had desperately clung to him in the hypnosis counseling room was now warm. Jeong-oh felt relieved by this warmth, but his concern returned when he realized Ji-heon was going to drive.

“Are you really okay to drive?”

“Of course.”

Ji-heon replied lightly. His condition had quickly recovered. He knew it was because Jeong-oh was by his side.

“If I had a little more time, I would have fully regained my strength…”

“Ugh.”

In the apartment parking lot, Jeong-oh hurriedly covered Ji-heon’s mouth as a passerby walked by. With his weakened heart, he had let his guard down and was now talking too freely.

“Yikes!”

But that hand soon fell away. Ji-heon’s tongue darted out and licked Jeong-oh’s palm.

“Hey!”

Jeong-oh shouted and withdrew his hand. Her face turned bright red from the sticky sensation on her palm.

Ji-heon stuck out his tongue in a teasing manner. It looked more suggestive than playful, and his gaze, half-lidded as he looked at her, hinted at a desire that could swell up at any moment.

I wonder if it's okay to take this man, whose mental state seems R-rated, straight to Ye-na.

Jeong-oh glared at Ji-heon with a frustrated expression, and he grabbed her shoulder, pulling her close to him. He was anxious about even a moment of distance between them.

The feelings he had while lying on the bed, confident that she was his, faded as soon as they stepped away. The distance felt more tenuous than ever. He had no idea when he would be able to overcome this anxiety. If possible, he wanted to stay with her 24/7.

"By the way, I have a question."

Once they got into the car, Jeong-oh asked.

"When the doctor mentioned the pregnancy test, you said 'no,' right?"

"I did?"

"Yes. The doctor described my old studio apartment. There were various things in the studio, and when he opened the desk drawer, there was a pregnancy test. We looked at the pregnancy test together the day before your accident."

Since he seemed not to remember, Jeong-oh clearly recounted what had happened just a few hours ago. Ji-heon's brow furrowed, just like back then.

"But you said 'no' while you were in hypnosis. Why was that?"

Ji-heon pondered the situation from that time. He thought he could see something in the pinhole-sized field of vision, but the image wouldn't

resurface as if someone was forcibly pushing the memory away.

“I don’t know either. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.”

Jeong-oh waved her hand at his apology.

“I’m sorry.”

She wanted to pull out the memory but knew she couldn’t cause him pain out of her own desire. Now that they had met again and he vaguely remembered her, there was no need to struggle to recall the past.

It’s okay. Those empty spaces in your mind can be filled with a happy present.

“Let’s not do hypnosis therapy. We don’t need to.”

“…”

“I just want you to not feel anxious or distressed.”

He smiled slightly, lifting the corners of his lips, and started the car.

When they arrived home, they had dinner with Ye-na and Guk-soon.

There wasn’t much time left to spend in this house. Whether it was the coziness of the small house or the bright energy of its residents, Ji-heon, who hadn’t visited this place often, felt a sense of attachment and regret at leaving.

Memories.

They had formed memories.

He had been living a hollow life with nothing to remember and nothing to regret, but now there was a time he had to cherish. And because of those times, he felt he should live the future more fully.

He wanted to create more memories. He wanted to build precious recollections.

“Why is our Jeong husband doing the dishes? Just leave it.”

As soon as Ji-heon rolled up his sleeves to start washing the dishes, Guk-soon rushed over. Ji-heon had taken over the sink while Guk-soon had gone to the bathroom.

“I’ll do it.”

“Still, it’s not right for a newlywed to do that.”

It felt wasteful to have a son-in-law doing chores. Still, Guk-soon found Ji-heon’s actions admirable and quietly watched him.

Ji-heon was struggling to scrub the grime from Ye-na’s water bottle. As she watched him, Guk-soon ultimately smiled and took the brush and water bottle from Ji-heon’s hands.

“Our son-in-law doesn’t know how to scrub properly.”

“You have to scrub in the direction of the grime. There’s dirt in the horizontal lines, and scrubbing vertically for a hundred days won’t do any good.”

Guk-soon skillfully scraped the grime off the water bottle. Ji-heon stared at the now-clean opening of the bottle.

After putting Ye-na to bed, Jeong-oh and Ji-heon went outside.

Jeong-oh kept an eye on Ji-heon’s condition. Now that they were home and spending time with Ye-na, Ji-heon’s face had completely recovered. He didn’t look like someone who had just gone through such a difficult experience a few hours ago.

But she was worried that he might be forcing himself to seem fine.

“Are you sure you can drive well?”

“Of course.”

Ji-heon replied reassuringly, just like before, and called Jeong-oh over leisurely.

“Jeong-oh.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m going to continue with the hypnosis therapy.”

“…Are you sure that’s okay?”

“I’m not sure. But anyway, I’ll give it a try.”

Let’s scrub in the direction of the grime.

If there’s a response, let’s try in the direction of the response. Let’s not avoid it. That was the life lesson Ji-heon learned while washing the dishes today.

Hearing Ji-heon’s resolution lit up Jeong-oh’s eyes. It wasn’t from excitement but from gratitude. She was thankful that Ji-heon was making an effort to improve.

“Okay! Then I’ll contact the doctor again. Just don’t overdo it. You don’t have to find those memories, and there are other ways to treat this.”

“…”

“Oppa is precious; it’s not the memories that are precious.”

“Are you telling me not to go home now?”

The warm conversation shifted abruptly, and his gaze turned lewd.

Jeong-oh was so taken aback that she flared her nostrils. Ji-heon embraced her.

“Now, this is goodbye, but also hello.”

She thought about giving him a little lecture, but Jeong-oh couldn’t say anything in response to his sweet voice.

Two days before the move. She would finally be able to live under the same roof with him. Jeong-oh felt giddy about it like a child.

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After parting with Jeong-oh, Ji-heon, feeling invigorated, went to meet with the counselor. Upon arriving at the meeting place, Ji-heon first asked the counselor about Kim Jin-goo.

“Have you visited the accident scene?”

“Yes. The police classified it as an accidental fall, so the site was cleaned up quickly.”

“Have the autopsy results come out? Was there anything unusual with the body?”

“Other than a high blood alcohol concentration, there seems to be nothing significant. However…”

“…”

“They still haven’t found his cellphone.”

“That cellphone must have recorded the video he sent me.”

Ji-heon showed the email Kim Jin-goo had sent him to the counselor again.

“I haven’t reported this email to the police. Since they’re not looking for it, I don’t think I need to submit it myself.”

As Ji-heon spoke to the counselor, who was closely examining the video attached to the email, the counselor nodded several times.

“The vehicle’s number plate isn’t visible. If we could see the license plate, it would be easier. We need to identify the vehicle type first. The background scenery isn’t distinctive, so it won’t be easy either.”

“But you can still try, right?”

“We have to give it a shot. It could take a long time.”

“I’ll provide as many cases as needed. Please, I’m counting on you.”

“Is there anything else that might be a clue? Someone you have a hunch about?”

At the counselor’s question, Ji-heon hesitated for a moment before answering.

“Kim Jin-goo threatened Chae Eun-bi, a witness to the accident seven years ago. I mentioned to Eun-bi that I have an older brother.”

“Ah, yes. Lawyer Chae Eun-yeob.”

The counselor answered right away, having gathered that information through investigations.

“Chae Eun-yeob is ambitious and will go to any lengths for his goals. We can’t jump to conclusions, but the person tracking Kim Jin-goo could be someone hired by Eun-yeob.”

“I’ll need to look into that.”

The counselor nodded.

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After a week of construction, wallpapering, cleaning, and moving in furniture, Sunday finally arrived, marking the day for Jeong-oh’s family to move.

Jeong-oh got out of bed, feeling groggy. She had fallen asleep with her neck twisted, having rolled off her pillow. She could guess how much Ye-na had kicked during the night.

Ye-na, you might become a soccer player rather than a Go player, huh?

Jeong-oh laid Ye-na down properly and stepped out of the room. Her neck was stiff, so she rubbed the back of her neck and drank some water.

How will Ye-na sleep now? Am I going to have to keep sleeping with her?

'It doesn't seem like Jeong Ji-heon would allow that.'

Jeong-oh and Ji-heon decorated Ye-na's bedroom. After moving in, they wanted to surprise her, so they hadn't shown her the room yet. Naturally, they hadn't talked about sleeping arrangements with Ye-na either.

The task for today would be to persuade Ye-na to sleep in her own room.

"What's wrong? Did you sleep poorly?"

Kuk-soon, who had woken up earlier than Jeong-oh and had already tidied up, asked. She quickly checked her daughter's condition.

"Yes. Ye-na slept really roughly."

"You're just like you were when you were little, so fierce."

"Mom, don't tell Ye-na's dad about that, okay?"

Ji-heon had begun to enjoy teasing Jeong-oh whenever he discovered her weaknesses. He felt like he would have a lot of fun teasing her again if he learned this secret, so Jeong-oh firmly instructed her mom.

Ding-dong.

Just as she finished her instructions, the front door opened, and Ji-heon walked in.

“Mother, did you sleep well? What’s wrong with Jeong-oh?”

Noticing Jeong-oh’s sulky nod, Ji-heon immediately asked.

“I slept poorly…”

“Then rest in my car. Don’t bother helping with the move.”

Ji-heon offered a solution to Jeong-oh’s confession.

While the moving crew handled the heavy lifting, Jeong-oh and Ye-na spent time in Ji-heon’s car, while Kuk-soon and Ji-heon directed the workers and helped with the smaller tasks. Thanks to the thorough organizing done by Kuk-soon and Ji-heon the day before, the moving process went smoothly.

While waiting for Kuk-soon and Ji-heon, someone knocked on the car window.

“Ah? Uncle!”

Ye-na was the first to shout. It was Kwon Bae-il.

Jeong-oh and Ye-na opened the car door and stepped outside.

“Hello, Ye-na.”

“Hello, Uncle!”

“You’re moving today, right? Is there anything uncomfortable?”

Noticing Jeong-oh’s discomfort, Bae-il asked kindly.

“No, I just slept poorly.”

As Jeong-oh answered, Ye-na giggled beside her. Meanwhile, Bae-il went into the house and quickly came back out. He was holding a paper bag.

Bae-il handed the paper bag to Jeong-oh. Inside were a Go board, Go stones, and a coin patch.

“It’s a coin patch. It works well when you have a stiff neck. Once the move is over, it might be good for your family to use it too.”

“Oh, no, you didn’t have to…”

Jeong-oh was taken aback by the unexpected gift and couldn’t properly express her gratitude. Without waiting for Jeong-oh’s reaction, Bae-il spoke to Ye-na.

“Ye-na, this is a gift from Uncle.”

“A Go board?”

“Yes. But this is not just any Go board; it’s signed by the professional player who has won the most championships in our country.”

Upon hearing Bae-il’s explanation, Jeong-oh was even more surprised.

“No, you can’t just give me something so precious. No, it’s okay.”

“I don’t play Go anymore, so I thought it would be nice to give it to Ye-na since she likes it.”

“Still…”

“Good luck with your move, and take care.”

While Jeong-oh fidgeted, Ye-na accepted the paper bag.

“Uncle, this is heavy.”

“Should I carry it for you?”

“Yes!”

Bae-il placed the paper bag into the moving truck. Ye-na gave a hearty greeting.

“Thank you!”

“Ye-na, you’ll be a first grader next year, right?”

“Yes!”

“Good. Have fun in school, stay healthy, and be cheerful.”

“Yes!”

Bae-il ruffled Ye-na’s hair. It was a warm gesture.

“Lee Ye-na. Your name is going to change now.”

Not understanding Bae-il’s implication, Ye-na tilted her head. Bae-il spoke to her in a gentle voice.

“Even if your name changes, Uncle will always remember you.”

Ch117 - 117. A Perfect Family

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Eun-bi slowly got out of bed. Her low-grade fever wasn't getting any better.

"I'll go to the pharmacy, change clothes, and then head to the hair salon."

She had a matchmaking appointment scheduled for the evening. It was with a man she had briefly encountered at Eun-yeob's office not long ago.

He was forty years old, a self-made individual with assets in the hundreds of millions. He was the youngest among the people Eun-yeob had introduced and had the best conditions. Most importantly, it was his first marriage. Other than his face, which she had only seen in passing, he seemed like a decent person.

She couldn't just stubbornly refuse; he might be a good match. The people her brother introduced were, as he said, those whom she would never be able to meet again.

Despite his age, finding a man who could love her completely and living happily while being loved might not be so bad. If he was an incredibly wealthy person, it would also benefit her family, and she could enjoy a life of wealth for a lifetime.

Eun-bi left her house, pondering what to wear today.

On her way to the pharmacy, she caught a glimpse of herself in the shiny glass windows of the shops she passed. She had thought she was gaining weight, but after Deputy Jo Yoo-ri pointed it out, she had lost quite a bit.

Since she hadn't eaten anything, the weight loss came naturally. However, her gaunt face looked dreadful.

“I need to eat something.”

On her way back from the pharmacy, Eun-bi decided she should buy something to eat. The large steamed dumplings from the dumpling shop next to the pharmacy looked appetizing. They were mouthwatering. It was a little surprising for her to feel this way about food she had never found appealing before.

And this surprising feeling connected to a memory from the past. It had been the same seven years ago. A past she didn’t want to remember pressed heavily on her heart.

“Could it be…?”

Before she could even open the pharmacy door or confirm the reality, tears welled up in her eyes.

That day, which came once a month without fail, somehow felt like it wasn’t coming. Her menstrual cycle was irregular, so she thought it might be delayed due to stress, but upon reflection, it had almost been two months.

Thinking back, she felt nauseous, as if she had been riding in a car on an empty stomach, and sleepiness was creeping in.

“Welcome! What seems to be the problem?”

The pharmacist kindly asked. Eun-bi carefully made her request.

“I’d like one… no, two pregnancy tests, please. Also, some headache medicine.”

The pharmacist handed Eun-bi the pregnancy tests and headache medicine and accepted the card she offered.

“Take the medicine after meals. On an empty stomach…”

“Thank you.”

Before the pharmacist could finish her advice, Eun-bi snatched the card and left the pharmacy.

That man, Kwon Bae-il.

He had always been meticulous about contraception, to the point where Eun-bi felt it was pathological, which made her frown.

So she thought she wouldn’t be pregnant, repeating it to herself. But for some reason, a sense of unease rushed in. It reminded her of the exact same feeling she had seven years ago.

Hurrying home, Eun-bi dashed to the bathroom. With trembling hands, she tore open the packaging of the pregnancy test and tried it. The waiting time felt like an eternity. And then…

Two red lines appeared. Two bright red lines that she couldn’t deny.

With a dazed expression, Eun-bi opened the remaining test package. Afraid she had made a mistake in her testing method, she carefully read the instructions before using the test again. A few minutes later, she used the test with utmost care.

Once again, there were two distinct lines.

“Ugh.”

Tears filled her eyes, and nausea rose.

After moving all the belongings, Ji-heon got into the car with Guk-soon and asked Jeong-oh. Jeong-oh’s head, which had been awkwardly tilted, was now upright.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah. I put on the patch. Do you want one too?”

Jeong-oh responded while offering a pain relief patch.

“It works well. If you have any sore spots, put it on.”

“Dad, that’s from the police uncle!”

Ena chimed in with Jeong-oh’s words.

“Police uncle?”

Ji-heon narrowed his eyes. Guk-soon clapped her hands as if she just remembered.

“Oh, I didn’t thank that police guy. I wanted to give him some side dishes before we moved.”

“Guy?”

Ji-heon mumbled quietly at Guk-soon’s words. The term “guy” stuck in his head.

Jeong-oh swallowed hard.

“Come on, Ji-heon. Are you going to show jealousy in front of your mother-in-law over the neighbor’s police guy?”

“Just the neighbor’s police officer. He’s the one who brought Ena to the academy the day she almost got kidnapped.”

Jeong-oh intervened. After that statement about the grateful police officer who found their Ena, Ji-heon no longer showed signs of jealousy and turned his head to grasp the steering wheel.

They soon arrived at their new house since it wasn’t far.

“Wow! It’s our house! Hooray!”

Ena shouted as she entered the neatly organized home.

“Can you guess which room is Ena’s? Take a guess.”

“I know exactly which one it is. Should I tell you?”

In response to Jeong-oh’s question, Ena confidently answered.

“This room! Right here!”

Ena stood in front of the second room down the hallway and knocked on the door.

“The door is pink! Ena’s favorite color. And can you see the heart here? Ena loves hearts.”

Ena’s room was decorated according to her tastes, starting from the door. Ji-heon and Jeong-oh had put their heads together, determined to create the room they wanted for Ena.

“That’s right. This is it. Shall we go in?”

Jeong-oh took Ena’s hand. Ena opened the door.

And there was a world full of pink.

A pretty desk, a princess bed, and walls filled with toys, dolls, and fairy tale books.

“Wow.”

Ena exclaimed, unable to close her mouth. The astonishment in her wide-open eyes reflected her bewilderment.

“Mom, is this Ena’s room?”

“Of course. It’s Ena’s room.”

At Jeong-oh’s firm response, Ena jumped in excitement and ran over to the toy organizer. The toy she had seen in a TV advertisement and longed for was inside.

Ena hugged the toy and jumped up and down. It felt like the sound of her heart beating was audible within her chest.

Jeong-oh asked.

“Do you like it? Are you happy?”

“Yeah! I love it!”

After jumping for a bit, Ena set the toy down and sat in front of the desk. While wiggling on the spinning chair, Ena spun around once and then replied.

“It’s even better than my birthday!”

But gradually, her face contorted. “Uuuuuuh!” Soon, large tears began to drip from Ena’s bright eyes.

The child was so adorable while crying that a smile crept onto Jeong-oh’s face. She approached Ena and hugged her.

“Why are you crying?”

“This is really a princess room!”

Well, that’s because our Ena is a real princess.

“Aren’t you a princess too, Ena?”

“I’m only a princess to Mom. Uuuuuuh!”

“No, our Ena is a princess to everyone.”

For the first time, the child learned that tears can flow even when you’re happy.

Jeong-oh gently comforted the crying girl. Ji-heon smiled contentedly from behind them.

Jeong-oh’s belongings and Ena’s toys were put away in their respective rooms.

Among all the rooms in the house, Guk-soon’s room was the largest. It had an en-suite bathroom, a desk, a heated ondol bed, a massage chair, and a wall-mounted TV positioned high enough to watch comfortably while seated in the massage chair.

Guk-soon sat quietly on the bed, feeling the end of it. Just then, there was a knock, and Ji-heon entered.

“Mother, do you like the room?”

“Of course. I love it.”

“……”

“I don’t know if I deserve such luxury. It’s so nice that it feels burdensome.”

Ji-heon knelt down on one knee in front of Guk-soon, who was sitting on the bed, awkwardly smiling as if unsure of what to do.

“Mother, I will accept everything you give me with joy, without feeling any burden. Whether it’s food or gifts or anything else, it’s all because you want to do it for me.”

“……”

“So don’t feel pressured about the things I do for you either.”

Now, they were no longer strangers; they were family.

Guk-soon lifted her head and looked into her son-in-law’s eyes for the first time, seeing the same color as Ena’s.

Now they were a complete family. A son-in-law to cherish as a son.

“Okay. I’ll think that way. So if there’s anything you want or feel upset about, just tell me right away.”

“Yes, I will. Mother, you should check the kitchen now. We need to put away the dishes and kitchen tools.”

“Oh, right. I’ll do that. Got it.”

Guk-soon quickly got up from her seat. Ji-heon opened the door first and went out. Guk-soon felt a sense of security looking at her son-in-law’s back.

The moving process was going smoothly. As the sun began to set, Seung-kyu’s family arrived.

Today, as soon as Dobin opened the front door, he shouted loudly.

“Enaaaaaaa!”

“Park Dobin!”

Ena rushed over.

“I got a room! Come quickly! Hurry!”

Ena grabbed Dobin’s hand and dashed into her room, with Doyun following closely behind.

“Wow! Is this heaven?”

Dobin exclaimed in amazement as he entered the room.

While trying to call a lighting technician due to a malfunction in one of the lights, Ji-heon received a phone call from Seung-kyu. After Ji-heon explained the lighting issue, Seung-kyu said he would take care of it and came over with his whole family.

“Welcome.”

“Wow! It looks even prettier now that it’s decorated. This house is great.”

“I’m sorry for coming by when you must be busy moving in today.”

Seung-kyu and Jin-seo greeted Ji-heon warmly in response to his welcome.

“No, it’s fine. We’re glad you came. We’re thinking of ordering jjajangmyeon; could you recommend a good Chinese restaurant in this neighborhood?”

Jeong-oh also came out to the entrance to welcome Seung-kyu and Jin-seo. Laughter from the children could be heard coming from Ena’s room. The three kids were jumping with all their might on the bed. It looked like the bed would break immediately after being bought.

“Oh my, Park Dobin! Didn’t Mom tell you not to jump on the bed?”

Jin-seo, who had quickly switched from guest mode to mom mode, scolded Dobin.

“But that’s Mom’s bed. This is Ena’s bed!”

“It’s even more wrong to jump on Ena’s bed.”

“But Ena said I could jump!”

“It’s okay to jump here.”

Ena chimed in, supporting Dobin’s claim.

“Dobin, jump around a lot in my room!”

“Okay!”

With Ena’s permission, Dobin jumped even more vigorously, seeming to enter a state of ecstasy as he jumped just for the sake of jumping.

Jin-seo sighed deeply.

“It’s fine. The bed is sturdy. Just as long as no one gets hurt.”

Jeong-oh reassured her.

While Seung-kyu worked with Ji-heon on the lighting, Jeong-oh and Guk-soon finished organizing the kitchen, and Jin-seo supervised the kids.

Eventually, the jjajangmyeon that Jin-seo had recommended arrived. Everyone gathered around the spacious dining table to eat, and as the kids played a bit more, the world outside turned completely dark.

“Time to go, Park Dobin.”

Seung-kyu called out to Dobin while putting on Doyun’s shoes. Dobin, feeling a bit disappointed, sprawled out on Ena’s bed.

“Ah! I want to live here!”

“Then Dobin has to call Auntie ‘Mom.’”

Jeong-oh joked, and Dobin replied.

“That’s not okay.”

“Why not?”

“Because my mom said if I call another person ‘Mom,’ it means I can’t get married.”

Ji-heon’s eyes widened at Dobin’s answer.

“Dobin, Dad is calling you. You need to go home quickly.”

“But I still want to play more.”

Dobin mumbled, oblivious to Ji-heon’s hint.

Ji-heon gritted his teeth and smiled.

“Dobin, you have to listen to your uncle, okay?”

Though his lips formed a long smile, his eyes looked threatening.

Ch118 - Ji-heon's Wish

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As Dobin’s face fell at the thought of going home, he asked Ji-heon, “Can I come back again tomorrow?”

“Sure, come again tomorrow.”

“Can I bring my pajamas and sleep over tomorrow?”

Ha ha. Look at this kid.

Seeing his cheeky demeanor, Ji-heon thought about Park Seung-kyu’s son, who once pouted to have fun with his girlfriend to save face.

Ji-heon patted Dobin’s head and chuckled, feeling an unexpected warmth in his fingertips.

“Haha. You’re just a tiny little guy.”

“I’m 120 cm! Do you have a 120 cm booger, uncle?”

“Park Seung-kyu. You should take your son home.”

Ji-heon turned his head towards the front door as he spoke. Seung-kyu, who hadn’t heard their conversation, called out lazily, “Park Dobin, if you don’t come now, I’ll leave you behind.”

Who says they can leave him behind?!

Finally, Ji-heon, feeling overwhelmed, lifted Dobin into his arms.

“Waaaah! Ena, goodbye!”

Dobin flailed his arms as if he were on a bridge like the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl in a fairy tale, waving goodbye to Ena.

“Yeah! Goodbye!”

Ena also chased after Dobin, waving back.

Phew. Now I can finally relax.

Only after sending Seung-kyu’s family away did Ji-heon regain his true peace. Ena, who had come out to the entrance, fiddled with the yellow umbrella stuck in the umbrella holder and spoke.

“Oh? Dad has this umbrella too? Ena has this umbrella too.”

Ena brought out the same umbrella from her shoe rack and held it up. The two identical umbrellas met.

It was the umbrella Jeong-oh had bought for Ji-heon on a rainy day long ago, while he was on his way to a dinner with an advertiser.

Back then, when she handed him that umbrella, Ji-heon hadn’t fully understood his feelings. He didn’t know why he was drawn to her or why he was so easily swayed by her; his eyes were simply drawn to her. It seemed he had loved her without even realizing it.

“That’s the umbrella Mom bought for Dad.”

“Oh, so Mom bought it. That makes sense.”

Ji-heon laughed at his child’s tone.

A dark night. Eun-yeob visited Eun-bi’s house.

She hadn’t gone to any matchmaking events, had her phone turned off, and being the only younger sibling hadn’t added any value to the household.

Eun-yeob was furious because Eun-bi was too clueless to do anything properly.

“Chae Eun-bi.”

Forcing open the front door, Eun-yeob called her younger sister irritably. It seemed like Eun-bi was home. Sounds of retching came from the bathroom.

Wondering if she was sick, Eun-yeob frowned and looked around. Her gaze stopped at the side table.

A used pregnancy test sat there. Eun-yeob was flabbergasted at the result showing two red lines in parallel.

Moments later, the sound of the toilet flushing was heard, and Eun-bi emerged from the bathroom.

“What? Why are you here?”

Seeing Eun-yeob, Eun-bi made a disgusted face, as if she had seen something horrifying. Eun-yeob thrust the pregnancy test at her.

Gasping, Eun-bi quickly lunged forward and snatched it from Eun-yeob’s hands.

“What the heck! Why are you breaking into someone else’s house and doing this?”

“Who’s the father of the baby?”

Eun-yeob asked in a cold voice.

“Who’s the loser?”

“…It’s not mine.”

“Make sense. If it’s not yours in a house where you live alone, whose could it be?”

Eun-bi’s arms grew cold as if she had chills. She shrank back, cautiously trying to distance herself from Eun-yeob.

“Who’s the father?”

“……”

“Who’s that loser?”

Eun-yeob continued to press her.

“You don’t know? You really don’t know?”

“……”

“How long has it been?”

“……”

“How many weeks along are you?!”

Although she didn’t particularly want to protect what was inside her belly, for some reason, Eun-bi instinctively wrapped her arms around it.

With an irritated expression, Eun-yeob turned away, clearly tired of the conversation.

“Get the surgery done tomorrow. I’ll take care of it.”

Eun-yeob had a history of helping some of her female acquaintances get surgeries, and there was a particular hospital she always contacted for these situations.

However, rather than nodding in understanding and gratitude, her sister looked at her with tear-filled eyes and resentment. Eun-yeob was taken aback.

“The sooner you do this, the better.”

“I can’t do it.”

“Stop talking nonsense and just do it. Everyone does.”

“I can’t, I can’t.”

Eun-bi whimpered and clutched Eun-yeob’s arm, pleading.

“I can’t… I can’t do it.”

“Are you out of your mind? Do you want to be a single mother?”

Eun-bi shook her head vigorously, tears streaming down her face.

“Do you want to ruin your life because of the baby? Or is the baby’s dad going to live with you? Even if he’s a billionaire? Or is it Jeong Ji-heon?”

Eun-yeob snapped, trying to wake her immature sister up to reality as she held her phone.

“Enough talk. I’ll contact the hospital.”

“I’ve done it before!”

At Eun-bi’s scream-like confession, Eun-yeob lowered the phone she had raised. Eun-yeob squinted in surprise at the unexpected revelation.

“I-I’ve had surgery.”

“When?”

“…Seven years ago.”

“In the U.S.?”

Reluctantly, Eun-bi confessed the truth.

Seven years ago in the U.S., Eun-bi had gotten pregnant by her boyfriend. The man, taken aback, facilitated the surgical procedures.

Eun-bi had the surgery performed by a man who didn’t even have a medical license. She couldn’t choose a proper hospital for fear that her family in Korea would find out.

After the surgery, the man naturally left Eun-bi. That became the reason she gave up her studies abroad and returned to Korea.

It was a horrific time. If she hadn’t met Jeong Ji-heon again, she would have suffered in pain for a long time.

She didn’t want to go back to that time.

“They said I developed adhesions because I overdid it back then. If I have surgery again, I won’t survive. No way, no way.”

“Are you even human or are you trash?”

However, she couldn’t expect any comfort from her brother.

“Think a little. It’s been seven years; you should be fully healed by now. That’s why you got pregnant. What’s the problem?”

She couldn’t persuade her brother with something from seven years ago. Eun-bi desperately tried to stop Eun-yeob.

“No. I still can’t have surgery. I’ll do it with medication.”

She couldn’t go back to that operating table; she couldn’t endure that pain again. It was far too horrific.

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Before long, it was time to go to bed.

Guk-soon, who had been watching TV with Ena in the living room, began to doze off.

“Mom, you should go to bed.”

“Oh my. I fell asleep.”

Guk-soon slowly replied, waking up at Jeong-oh’s call. It had been such a tiring day, waking up early to supervise the moving process, organizing the new house, and hosting guests.

“Right. You should sleep now too.”

As Guk-soon made her way slowly to her room, Ji-heon greeted her.

“Goodnight, Mother. You worked really hard today.”

“Yeah. You too, Ena. You worked hard as well.”

“……”

“I’m so grateful.”

After Guk-soon waved her hand and entered her room, Ji-heon turned to Ena.

“You should wash up and go to bed too.”

“Dad should wash me.”

Hearing their conversation, Jeong-oh chimed in with some nagging.

“Lee Ena, you should try doing it by yourself now.”

But Ena, unfazed, spread her arms towards her dad. Ji-heon chuckled and lifted Ena, heading toward the bathroom.

He washed her hands and feet, helped her wash her face, and cleaned her teeth. Ji-heon had become quite adept at bathing his child. He felt that he was slowly becoming a father.

“Change your clothes and lie down in bed. I’ll read you a story.”

“Okay!”

Ena quickly ran to her room after Ji-heon’s words, changed into her pajamas, and came out with a pillow and a fairy tale book.

Princess Ena headed toward the master bedroom without a care.

“Dad, hurry up!”

Caught off guard by this, Ji-heon felt a bit flustered. However, he couldn’t let the child see his inner turmoil.

“Are you going to sleep here?”

“Yeah!”

Well, it wouldn’t be easy for a child who had always slept with her mother to sleep alone. Raising a child was like that. The desire to monopolize his wife had to be set aside at times like this. For the time being, it seemed he would have to adapt to such nights.

Seeing that Ena had claimed the bed, Jeong-oh entered the master bedroom and said, “Ena, but this bed doesn’t have a guardrail. You’re definitely going to fall off.”

“No, I sleep really prettily!”

“That’s because Mom puts it back perfectly every morning.”

In the end, the three of them spread a large blanket beside the bed in the master bedroom and lay down together. No matter how expensive the bed was, it was of no use. At least Ena’s bed served as a trampoline substitute, which was something to be thankful for, right?

Snuggled between her mom and dad, Ena pulled the blanket snugly over her shoulders and continued to giggle. Even when the protagonist in the story Ji-heon was reading faced difficulties, Ena was just giggling and not paying attention.

Ji-heon closed the storybook and asked, “Aren’t you going to sleep, Ena?”

“Dad, today Ena is the happiest in the world.”

Ena replied with her bright, sparkling eyes.

Her heart was already full of happiness, so full that there was no room for any other feelings.

“It’s the happiest day for Ena in the whole world because all her wishes have come true.”

He didn’t ask what wishes they were. He could guess, and somehow he felt that asking would bring tears again. Right now, he just wanted to protect the child’s clear smile.

Ahahahaha, uhuhuhuh, kikikikiki. Ji-heon couldn’t help but laugh along with Ena’s joyful giggles. Seeing the child happy made Ji-heon happy as well.

Jeong-oh had never seen Ji-heon laugh so heartily.

After laughing for quite a while and receiving a few nagging remarks from Jeong-oh, Ena finally fell asleep.

Watching the sleeping child—this was the dream he had longed for, and now Ji-heon could do it every day.

As Ji-heon gazed at Ena with a dazed expression, Jeong-oh recalled the days when they lived in the villa. Watching Ji-heon look at the sleeping child made her heart feel heavy. Had her mother looked at her with such feelings too?

After a while of silently watching, Jeong-oh asked, “Do you have a wish, oppa?”

Ji-heon answered after a long pause.

“My wish will never come true.”

As he had done with Jeong-oh, Ji-heon continued while brushing Ena's disheveled hair.

"If only for just one day, I want to go back to when Ena was younger. I want to go back and hold little Ena."

"……"

"If God appeared and granted that wish, I'd live ten or a hundred times harder than now."

Having answered that much, Ji-heon let out a soft, deflated laugh. It felt childish and embarrassing to make a promise to live hard in exchange for a wish from God.

Jeong-oh found Ji-heon endearing, despite that.

As Ji-heon caressed the child, his fingertips brushed over Ena's shoulder and touched Jeong-oh.

"But even now, while regretting it, this time is incredibly precious."

"……"

"I love you."

His hand, which had been stroking her hair, moved down to her earlobe, then along her jawline, tracing her neck.

Jeong-oh's eyes sparkled as she looked at him.

"Oppa."

"……"

"I wish Ena had a younger sibling."

Instead of answering with "I love you too," Jeong-oh offered a poignant alternative.

……A few seconds later, she regretted saying that deeply.

Ch119 - Words I Want to Hear

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They were lying side by side with Ena in between them.

Somehow, Ji-heon was now next to Jeong-oh.

“Are you serious?”

Ji-heon asked as he placed his large hand on her waist. His gaze was deep and beautiful, prompting Jeong-oh to emphasize once more that she was serious.

“Of course…”

But her words trailed off.

“You know what needs to be done to have a little sister for Ena.”

With Ji-heon’s additional comment, he pulled Jeong-oh’s waist closer. What she thought was a warm and gentle gaze turned out to be hot and intense.

Jeong-oh seemed to finally grasp the mystery of how a child is born, swallowing hard.

They say couples start to resemble each other. But they had only just barely registered their marriage and had lived together for less than a day; yet they had already crossed the line from resembling each other to reversing roles.

Jeong-oh, who had always focused on the results, only envisioned the outcome in her mind, while Ji-heon, the results-oriented one, reminded her of the process.

“…No, I don’t know.”

“You will. My wife isn’t a child.”

Suddenly transforming into a process-oriented individual, Ji-heon’s hand slipped into Jeong-oh’s waist. The touch was so sensual that a gasp escaped her lips. Surprised by her own voice, Jeong-oh buried her face into Ji-heon’s chest.

Ena was right next to them!

As she inwardly resented Ji-heon, she playfully punched his chest. In response, Ji-heon shot up, and Jeong-oh instinctively recoiled.

“…I didn’t mean to say let’s make one right now.”

“No, you were completely serious.”

His voice and gaze were filled with desire.

Ji-heon had now lifted her up completely.

How had the man who had just confessed such a heart-wrenching and affectionate wish transformed into this? Why did that switch keep getting pressed?

Now, Jeong-oh found herself lifted by the man who loved to show off his strength. As her body swayed, she clung to Ji-heon tighter.

Having just put Ena to sleep, she couldn’t make any noise. It was a favorable situation for Ji-heon; his pretty wife was in a position where she couldn’t reject him.

As he easily lifted her and stepped out of the bedroom, he opened the door to the adjacent room. It was strange to see a bed sitting in an empty space; it made her wonder if it was for sleeping separately after a fight, but it turned out to have a rather risqué purpose.

Should she think it was fortunate that they were finally using the bed as a bed?

But once safely landed on the bed, Jeong-oh felt tiny and vulnerable.

“Today was moving day… You’re tired, oppa.”

“No. I’m not tired.”

Ji-heon replied as if it were obvious. No, it seemed he had become even more energized.

Jeong-oh couldn’t comprehend how a man who had just moved could have so much energy, like an inexhaustible power source.

Thinking back, this was indeed his true nature. He had always interpreted her words and actions in a provocative manner, turning every situation into something sensual.

She had provoked such a person on the happiest day.

She had a feeling that if she messed up today, she would end up sleeping in tomorrow.

Holding her neck, she let out a groan.

“Ahh, my neck is stiff…”

“You said the ointment helped.”

“I guess the effect has worn off. Oh dear…”

Ji-heon looked at Jeong-oh with suspicious eyes. However, he couldn’t bear to make someone who was in pain suffer further.

“Okay.”

“…”

“I won’t push you too hard.”

Huh?

Her startled arms flailed. Before she knew it, their lips met, and their chests touched. She felt his heart beating strongly. No, it might have been her own heart. Gradually, warmth radiated from the areas in contact.

As his hands moved, her body relaxed, only to tense again in response to the intensity of the sensations. She felt like she was being delicately handled by his large hands.

Could she really live happily with this man under one roof?

That was the worry that unexpectedly arose on their first night together.

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The next day.

Jeong-oh rubbed her eyes a few times, trying to get accustomed to the strange scenery upon waking up.

It was her first morning in the new house.

Just like Ena, who had shed tears wondering if this was really her room, Jeong-oh also felt unfamiliar with the new house and new room. In fact, everything felt bewildering. She had no idea when she would adapt.

She was alone in the room. As she sauntered outside, she found Guk-soon preparing breakfast, and from Ena’s room, she could hear the voices of father and daughter.

“Dad, whose bicycle is that by the door?”

“It’s Ena’s. I told you I bought her a bicycle.”

“But Ena doesn’t know how to ride a bicycle!”

“We’ll go ride it together later. I’ll teach you.”

“But you have to go to work, Dad.”

“I’ll finish work quickly.”

“Really? Promise?”

“Promise.”

“You can’t work late, okay?”

“Got it.”

“You can’t postpone it to another day, understood?”

“Understood.”

Peeking in through the open door, Jeong-oh saw the warm scene of the affectionate father and daughter, linking their pinky fingers. Seeing such a sight so early in the morning made her feel grateful.

“Mom!”

“Is your neck okay?”

Ena’s voice was followed by Ji-heon’s, which felt somewhat sharp. She wanted to say she was fine, but for some reason, she felt like replying that it still hurt.

“…Yeah. I’m okay.”

“Good. That’s a relief.”

The way he said he was relieved somehow sounded insincere. What was that feeling?

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Eun-bi had called the same phone number dozens of times throughout the night. But it was useless. The man's number had become a disconnected line.

Had she been deceived? Had she been used?

Eun-bi couldn't accept it. She hadn't lost any money or valuables. Nothing had disappeared.

But thinking back, she realized she didn't know anything about him. Just the three letters of the name Kwon Bae-il and which company he worked for, that was it.

But even that she couldn't guarantee. She had only seen his name on his ID for a brief moment, and they had never talked about his workplace. Eun-bi had been too busy sharing her own story to ask him anything.

She had used him like an emotional dumpster.

The man, who had continuously comforted her, had left out of exhaustion…

He had been the only one who genuinely cared about her, who gave her advice. He had been a precious person who understood her situation, her desires, and her troubled heart…

Only after dawn did Eun-bi finally fall asleep, and a call came in. It was Eun-yeob.

"Hello."

[I sent a delivery to your house.] "A delivery? What is it?"

[It's medicine. I barely managed to get it, so take it right away.] "…"

[Hurry up and take the medicine, and you have another date with Ham Dae-geun, so make sure to go out this time. Six o'clock today. The location is the same as yesterday.] "…You want me to take the medicine today and go out on a blind date today?"

Eun-bi snapped back in disbelief, and Eun-yeob tried to persuade her.

[He’s a good guy. He’s only ten years older than you and he’s never been married before. He’s a successful businessman and very popular, and he’s interested in you. Even after you stood him up once, he still wants to meet you.] “…”

[Make sure to seize this opportunity. You need to start living a life where you are loved, Eun-bi.]

As Eun-yeob spoke, Kwon Bae-il’s face flickered in Eun-bi’s mind. Where could he be? Why wasn’t he there to comfort her when she was struggling and feeling anxious?

A little while later, a delivery arrived at Eun-bi’s door. It was a very small box. After unwrapping it and checking the medicine, Eun-bi found herself unable to read the instructions for taking it all at once.

“Ugh.”

Tears blurred her vision.

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On the way to work, Ji-heon, as usual, dropped Jeong-oh off near the company, parked the car in the underground parking lot, and headed to his office. Just before getting on the elevator, he received a call from his father, Jae-gwang.

“Yes, Father.”

[Did you settle in well?] After learning of Yeong-mi’s misdeeds, Jae-gwang could no longer pressure Ji-heon to bring Ena over. He couldn’t even mention visiting Ji-heon’s house.

However, he couldn’t give up on his desire to meet his granddaughter, so he had become someone who waited for the right moment to contact Ji-heon.

“Yes. I finished well.”

[Good. Congratulations on getting a new house.] “Thank you.”

[I also want to meet my granddaughter.] Hearing his father’s cautiously spoken words, Ji-heon couldn’t fully welcome them with relief. He couldn’t visit Jae-gwang’s house while ignoring the deep-rooted conflict with Yeong-mi.

“I’ll talk to Jeong-oh about it.”

[Okay. Try to discuss it nicely.] “Yes.”

As Ji-heon was about to end the call with his father, Jae-gwang held him back again.

[I heard that Kim Jin-gu passed away. Do you know anything about it?]
It seemed Jae-gwang had also heard the news about Kim Jin-gu. Ji-heon considered whether to reveal that he had received an email from Kim Jin-gu but decided to keep quiet.

“No, do you know anything, Father?”

[I only heard the news late. Anyway, since Kim Jin-gu has passed, I think it’s okay to make your marriage official.]
“I’ll talk to Jeong-oh about that too.”

[Yeah. Talk to her soon and let me know.]
“Okay.”

After finishing the call with his father and reaching the ninth floor on his way to his office, Ji-heon noticed Jeong-oh standing with a stranger. Her face lit up with a welcoming expression.

Come to think of it, wasn’t there supposed to be a new copywriter joining Team 1 today?

When Ji-heon was first assigned, Max Planning had acquired Ivory Planning. However, since they couldn’t absorb the staff from Ivory Planning without relocating the headquarters, they were maintaining the current situation by occasionally exchanging personnel.

Thanks to that, Jeong-oh was able to transfer to Max Planning, and the person standing in front of Ji-heon now had also moved over from Ivory Planning.

As Ji-heon approached, the team leader of Production Team 1, Ahn Chan-seob, introduced the newcomer.

“Director, this is Deputy Manager Kwon Dong-jae, the new copywriter joining Production Team 1 today.”

“Hello. Nice to meet you, Deputy Manager Kwon.”

His greeting was accompanied by a less than pleasant expression.

Ji-heon’s gaze quickly shifted to Jeong-oh standing beside him.

“It seems you two know each other.”

“Yes, he’s my senior from my previous company. He helped me with my job change.”

Deputy Manager Kwon Dong-jae chimed in, “There was nothing for me to help with; our Jeong-oh did such a great job.”

Our Jeong-oh?

Kwon’s choice of words made Ji-heon raise an eyebrow, while Gi-hun and Young-gwang from Production Team 2 slowly rose from their seats with pale faces.

Ji-heon shot a sharp glance at them and gave a faint smile.

“Seems like our Jeong-oh is quite capable.”

Jeong-oh’s forehead beaded with cold sweat.

“I have something to discuss with our capable Jeong-oh. Can we talk in my office for a moment?”

Jeong-oh swallowed hard and answered quietly, “Yes.”

“Let’s go.”

Ji-heon turned on his heels and walked away from Deputy Manager Kwon. Jeong-oh, who had been standing there awkwardly, followed behind him. The people from Production Team 2, who had been tense, slowly returned to their seats.

Seeing Deputy Manager Kwon Dong-jae standing there with his mouth agape, startled by the young department head’s fierce charisma, Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob tried to comfort him.

“He’s just that kind of person. Don’t worry about it, Deputy Kwon.”

“……”

“If you get to know him, he’s a good guy. Really, he is.”

Deputy Manager Ko Eun-joo from Production Team 2 leaned over to Team Leader Mi-ran, who had come closer.

“Honestly, Team Leader.”

“……”

“I think the Director just comes to work to protect Deputy Jeong-oh.”

“Shh! Don’t say that.”

Mi-ran quietly scolded Eun-joo.

Jeong-oh followed Ji-heon with quick steps as the secretary from the executive office, who had come in early, stood up to greet them.

“Good morning, Director.”

“Yes.”

Ji-heon nodded briefly and entered his office right away. Jeong-oh also hurriedly greeted the secretary before following Ji-heon inside.

“There’s no need to call someone over on a Monday morning if you have nothing to say.”

Jeong-oh, realizing Ji-heon was feeling jealous about her standing with Deputy Manager Kwon, confidently retorted. Ji-heon’s narrowed gaze fell on her.

“Honestly, you have nothing to say, right? You just called me for no reason?”

“Dear.”

Ji-heon called Jeong-oh playfully, using a term she had never heard before, which made her eyes widen.

She had expected him to say something like “Don’t get too close to Deputy Kwon” or “Don’t think about working on the same project together.”

“It’s been almost two weeks since we registered our marriage, and I still haven’t heard that word.”

“…What do you mean?”

“Dear.”

It was completely absurd but strikingly serious.

“Go ahead and say it. Dear.”

With a demand that sounded like a request to return borrowed money, Jeong-oh was left speechless.

Ch120 - Don’t Let Me Go

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Dear.

I must hear this and stop you.

His expression was filled with determination. But it was more than that. The way he looked at her made it seem like if she called him “dear” just once, he would devour her whole.

With such eyes and an unabashed smile plastered across his face, Jeong-oh felt at a loss about whether she should comply with his wishes or resist.

“Why? Can’t you do it?”

“…I just don’t feel like it right now.”

“If you don’t, you won’t be able to leave here.”

Ji-heon, arms crossed, stood at the door. It felt like a declaration of war.

Outside, Secretary Yoon Ae-ra was there, so she couldn’t raise her voice. Jeong-oh couldn’t bring herself to rush at him and merely glared silently. Ji-heon, with a wicked look in his eyes and a gentle voice, coaxed her.

“Dear, let’s get to work.”

“……”

“Don’t want to go out? Then let’s stay here…”

“Dear.”

“……”

“Is that enough?”

In the end, Jeong-oh surrendered and tossed out the word he wanted to hear.

And as expected, he fell for it beautifully. Ji-heon, approaching with a long grin, firmly clasped both of Jeong-oh’s hands and leaned in close to her face.

“Do it properly. I didn’t hear you.”

“I think I heard it.”

“No, you didn’t hear it.”

“Dear.”

Before she could even react, hot breath rushed into her mouth. It seemed he anticipated she would struggle, tightening his grip on their joined hands. There was no way for her to escape.

When she resigned herself and relaxed her shoulders, the grip on one hand loosened. The newly freed hand glided down her back, tracing along her spine. Jeong-oh flinched and took half a step back.

What met her was a look that suggested they could have a child like Yena any moment now.

“Should I leave early?”

He asked, full of bravado. Hadn’t he just arrived a few minutes ago?

“Or how about going on an outing? Shall we skip work?”

Jeong-oh’s flustered gaze darted around. She realized her mistake in bringing up such topics last night. She had fanned the flames, then turned a

fan toward the roaring fire.

“Oppa, you really need to work hard now. It’s not just about people badmouthing you anymore. If you fail, I’ll get criticized too. They’ll say Ji Heon was always a fool, but now that he’s married, he’s become an even bigger fool. That’s something we can’t let slip.”

She genuinely urged him. Ji-heon found her advice amusing and couldn’t help but chuckle.

Teasing Lee Jeong-oh was the most enjoyable thing in the world. He was filled with the desire to ditch work and spend a pleasant time with her, but it was a Monday, and he couldn’t afford to slack off.

“When should we announce our marriage?”

Only after satisfying his desires moderately did he bring up the matter at hand. Jeong-oh blinked blankly, her thoughts scattered.

“Hmm?”

“We need to let everyone know we registered our marriage. There might even be an article about it.”

“If there’s an article… Yena might come up too, right?”

“I’ll do my best to prevent that.”

Jeong-oh, seeming lost in thought, nodded quietly.

“I’ll talk to Yena first. It seems best to prepare her before making the announcement.”

“Right. Let’s do that. And one more thing.”

“Okay.”

“My father wants to see Yena. I’d like us to visit his place or invite him over.”

“I don’t mind how we meet. It’s fine if we go to the family home with my mother.”

Jeong-oh answered nonchalantly, despite Ji-heon carefully broaching the topic. He was surprised and asked.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I talked to my mother last time and said everything I wanted to. Besides, the truth about that phone call from seven years ago has been revealed, so she can’t say anything to me anymore.”

Ji-heon’s worries deepened at Jeong-oh’s response. She could sense why he felt that way.

He didn’t want to see his mother again since they had been estranged, but it must be painful for him to hear her positive response. Jeong-oh felt resentment towards Yeong-mi but thought that she shouldn’t sever ties between siblings.

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As time passed, it was 6 PM.

Eun-bi went on a blind date. The other party arrived earlier than her and greeted her.

“Hello, Chae Eun-bi.”

“Yes, hello.”

“I’m Ham Dae-geun, the representative of Daegun Mulsan.”

The man greeted her with a warm smile.

When she saw him in Eun-yeob’s office, there had been quite a bit of gray hair, but perhaps he had dyed it since then, as there were no signs of gray now. Even so, Eun-bi didn’t feel much fondness for him.

The man smiled even wider than he did in Eun-yeob's office. Each time he smiled, his shining gold teeth caught her eye.

"I think we met briefly in Attorney Chae's office."

"Yes."

"I thought so then, but you are truly beautiful."

"…Thank you."

"I heard you're a copywriter. Are there any ads you've created that I might know?"

Dae-geun had a knack for continuing the conversation without tiring, despite Eun-bi showing signs of boredom early on. Reluctantly, Eun-bi found herself answering.

"Perhaps it's because you're a copywriter that you speak so beautifully."

"But I'm taking a break from work right now. I'm preparing to switch jobs."

"There's no need for you to change jobs, you know?"

"Excuse me?"

"If you get married, you won't need to work outside anymore."

"……"

"No, staying at home to raise children and manage the household is the most ideal, right?"

There were many times she found the advertising company work tedious and frustrating, feeling like a mere errand runner for someone. But the satisfaction she felt when she achieved good results made it all worthwhile.

In fact, Eun-bi also thought that if she got married, there was no need to work. However, that was when Ji-heon was her husband. She believed she could be perfectly happy with just Ji-heon.

Yet, the man who came to her mind now was not Ji-heon.

Kwon Bae-il. A regular office worker. If she married him, she would have to work for the rest of her life. Therefore, she should be grateful for the opportunity to have a blind date with Ham Dae-geun instead.

She couldn’t understand why the world felt like it was crumbling around her.

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Ji-heon, who finished work early, went out to ride bicycles with Yena, as promised in the morning. Seung-kyu, who had taken a leave of absence for childcare since the kindergarten was on summer break starting today, also came along with Do-bin.

A long time ago, when Ji-heon bought Yena a bicycle, he had gifted Do-bin a bicycle too. By now, Do-bin had learned how to ride it and was doing well on his own without his father’s help.

Watching Do-bin zip around the playground by himself, Yena looked on with envy.

However, feeling envious and being able to do something were two different things. Once on the bicycle, Yena firmly instructed Ji-heon.

“Daddy, don’t let go.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t let go.”

“I got it.”

Ji-heon firmly replied as he held onto the back of Yena’s bicycle and chased after her. With his help, Yena gradually moved forward.

The bike, maintaining its balance and moving forward on its own, fascinated her, but she was also anxious that her dad might let go, causing her to look back occasionally. Each time she turned her head, the handlebar wobbled because of her weak arm strength.

“Yena, don’t look back. You need to keep your eyes on the front and pedal.”

“Okay. Daddy, you’re holding on tight, right?”

“Of course. I’m holding on. Don’t worry, just pedal.”

“You’re really behind me, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“Daddy, you have to hold on tight!”

Confirming again, Yena gained confidence from her dad’s response and gradually increased her speed. Strangely enough, as her pedaling quickened, she was able to maintain her balance better. Now, Yena could move forward without wobbling. However, she couldn’t relax.

“Daddy, don’t let go!”

“I got it.”

“Daddy!”

“Yeah?”

“Daddy.”

“……”

“Daddy, you need to answer!”

“Our daughter rides really well, doesn’t she?”

This was unbelievable.

She thought her dad was just holding on behind her, but he was actually running alongside her. The dad she relied on so much made her freeze when she confirmed his face beside her. Her father’s hands were not holding onto anything at all.

“Ahhh!”

At that moment of realization, her balance wavered. The handlebars moved wildly.

“Mommy!”

Feeling betrayed by her dad, Yena called out for her mom as she fell. Of course, Ji-heon, who was running beside her, quickly intervened. Yena and her bicycle toppled over onto Ji-heon.

With a helmet, knee pads, and the cushioning from her dad, Yena was protected enough that she only scraped her shins and didn’t suffer any serious injuries. As soon as Ji-heon got up, he asked,

“Yena, are you okay?”

But Yena was huffing and puffing.

“Are you hurt? Daddy is so…”

“I hate Daddy!”

When Ji-heon bent down to check his child’s wounds, Yena pulled her legs back and shouted. A few tears welled up in her eyes.

“I told you not to let go! You said you understood!”

The feeling of betrayal was greater than the pain from her scraped shins.

“I won’t believe Daddy anymore!”

Yena’s stubbornness meant she no longer wanted to ride her bicycle. No matter how much Ji-heon tried to coax her, it was useless. He couldn’t help but wonder who she had inherited that stubbornness from.

Yena sat on a bench in the playground, keeping her distance from her dad, until Do-bin began to tire.

“Why aren’t you riding your bike?”

“Didn’t you see me fall?”

“You fell? I didn’t see it.”

“I fell really hard. I got hurt here too.”

As Yena showed her scrape, Do-bin sat down in front of her and blew on it. Even though having a friend blow on her wound didn’t make the sting go away, it did seem to warm her heart a little.

“But why did you fall?”

“Daddy lied to me. He said he was holding on tight from behind, but he wasn’t holding on at all.”

“My dad did that too.”

Do-bin recalled the day he first learned to ride a bike. A bond formed between him and Yena.

“Why do dads teach us how to ride bikes but first teach us to lie? They tell us not to lie, but they do.”

“……”

“Yena, I won’t be that kind of dad.”

Despite everything, Do-bin didn’t forget to express his sincerity. Of course, Yena, still miffed by her dad’s lie, didn’t hear him.

By the time they returned home, Yena was still upset. Ji-heon, sensing her mood, quietly followed behind her, pulling the bicycle.

“Grandma, we’re back!”

“Did my puppy come home?”

“Yes.”

Yena replied to Guk-soon and immediately headed to her room. Seeing Yena’s worried expression, Guk-soon turned to Ji-heon and asked,

“Did something happen between the two of you?”

“I tried to teach her how to ride a bike… but I let go…”

Hearing the brief explanation from Ji-heon, Guk-soon burst into laughter.

“Oh dear. Our Yena holds a grudge for a long time; what should we do? Is our Yena’s daddy hurt at all?”

“It’s a little scraped, but Mother, do you know where the first aid kit is?”

Ji-heon asked, showing his elbow. He had only just realized he was hurt because he was focused on Yena’s reaction to what happened. The smile faded from Guk-soon’s face as she checked Ji-heon’s elbow.

“Oh my, what happened? There’s a hole in your elbow, and it’s still bleeding. Didn’t it hurt?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Wait here. I’ll go get some medicine.”

Guk-soon quickly got up. Hearing the commotion from the living room, Yena also opened the door. Angry at her dad for the betrayal, she hadn’t

even thought about the fact that he might be hurt.

Yena quietly watched her dad get treated. She thought it was strange that he wasn't crying when he was hurt this badly. As much as she found it fascinating, she also felt a delayed sense of guilt.

Feeling embarrassed to apologize for not noticing her dad was hurt, Yena quietly went back to her room and brought out a Go board and stones. She decided to try to reconcile with him through the game.

If she placed it on the table, her dad would quickly understand that her anger had dissipated.

As expected, Ji-heon noticed the neatly arranged Go board and stones on the table and chuckled.

"Yena, should we play Go together?"

Yena, who had been lingering near the living room, approached without answering. Ji-heon moved the container of stones to the side and unfolded the Go board. He wanted to praise her for her determined actions but quickly held back.

On the wooden Go board, there was a large signature from a professional Go player. It was the signature of a player who, over 20 years ago, was ranked number one in the world, known even beyond Korea.

Ji-heon had seen this player's signature long ago at a friend's house. A faint memory stirred in his mind, tickling his eyes. Ji-heon moved his fingertips over the signature, feeling overwhelmed, and asked,

"Yena, where did you get this?"

Ch121 - Love is Never Enough, No Matter How Much You Receive

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He was probably nine years old.

Jiheon, an ordinary child who enjoyed playing and loved Go, chose to take Go classes in school instead of attending private lessons or academies. The classes were open to all grades, from first to sixth, but there was only one other boy his age. Yoo Su-il, a lively and clever friend, had fair and delicate features.

Jiheon became quite close to Su-il. The Go class was held once a week, but they often hung out after school, and one day, Jiheon even went over to Su-il's house.

A single room, a living room—it was a very small place, where the living room was barely the size of Jiheon's bathroom at home.

Seeing Jiheon feeling awkward, Su-il proudly showed him a Go board. On it, a signature was boldly inscribed.

"Look at this."

"What is it?"

"It's a signature from Lee Kang-ho, 9-dan. Don't you know him?"
Su-il mentioned the name of the world's top-ranked Go player at the time, the man who made Korea a powerhouse in Go.

"Is this really Lee Kang-ho's signature?"

“Yep! My mom waited for hours outside the Go match venue to get it.”

Jiheon’s eyes widened at the thought of his friend’s mom waiting outside a match to get an autograph. It was something Jiheon couldn’t even imagine.

“Mom said it’s now our family’s treasure.”

“Why is someone else’s autograph your family’s treasure?”

“Because he’s that important.”

“…”

“One day, I’m going to be a world-class Go player like Lee Kang-ho, 9-dan.”

Su-il spoke confidently. Seeing his friend so boldly declare his dream at a young age was inspiring and, in a way, enviable.

“What about you? Do you want to become a Go player too?”

“Yes, I’d like that,” Jiheon nodded lightly. In truth, he didn’t really have a dream, but seeing his friend with one made him want to say so.

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Jiheon drifted into memories of an old friend from 20 years ago.

They were once quite close, but he stopped hanging out with him because of his mother.

What would that friend be doing now? He probably didn’t become a Go player.

“This Go board? A police officer gave it to me as a moving gift.”

Upon Jiheon’s question about the Go board, Yena answered.

“The officer who lived next door?”

“Yep! Dad, this isn’t just any Go board. It’s signed by the Go player with the most championship titles in Korea.”

Yena explained it to her dad just as Baeil had told her.

“The officer gave you something really valuable, didn’t he?”

“Yep! That’s right.”

Jiheon ran his fingers over the signature on the board. Only the signature was there, with no date to indicate when it was signed.

‘It can’t be, could it?’

Remembering his childhood friend made Jiheon chuckle to himself. It was probably just a token of one of the countless autographs given by a professional Go player who had reached the top spot. He must have signed thousands, if not tens of thousands, of them during his career.

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Late at night, Eunyeop, who was heading back to his family’s home, received a call. It was Ham Dae-geun, the CEO.

“Yes, Mr. Ham.”

[I thought you’d be waiting to hear back, so I wanted to give you a call.] Dae-geun’s voice was quite cheerful, clearly pleased with the recent meeting with Eunbi.

“Was everything alright? I hope our Eunbi didn’t make any mistakes.”

[Mistakes? Not at all, she only showed her lovely and graceful side.] Eunyeop let out a quiet sigh of relief.

[It may seem early, but I’d like to continue seeing her with marriage in mind.] “I think that will be welcome news for Eunbi as well.”

[Did she give a good response, too?] “Yes, she did.”

Though he hadn’t yet checked with Eunbi, Eunyeop answered smoothly.

[Oh, really? She didn’t seem that way in person.] “My sister is just a bit shy.”

[Ah, I see. Well, that’s a relief then.] Dae-geun sounded genuinely happy. Eunyeop reminded him of the next steps to take.

“Why not reach out to Eunbi directly tomorrow? I’d recommend setting another date.”

[I barely squeezed in time for the meeting, and my schedule is packed… But I’ll make time for this. You can’t get married after just one meeting, after all. Hahaha.] Dae-geun’s hearty laughter made it hard to know when to laugh along, but Eunyeop managed a polite chuckle.

[In any case, I look forward to this working out. By year’s end, you might be my brother-in-law, Attorney!] “Just hearing that makes me happy. I’m rooting for you both.”

With that, Eunyeop conveyed his polite wishes and ended the call.

When Eunyeop finished the call, he arrived at his family home and went to his father’s study.

“Father.”

“Yes.”

Chae Eunseok, the father of Chae Eunyeop and Chae Eunbi, had served as a Supreme Court justice for nine years. Two years ago, he had shown ambition to become the Chief Justice but had not succeeded, and now he was waiting for the right timing. He was planning to enter politics after his term ended this year.

Eunyeop supported his father in this pursuit.

“It seems the Chief Justice will resign soon. I hear it’s due to cancer.”

“…Is that so?”

“The Chief Justice has told the Blue House he’d recommend me. What do you think?”

Eunyeop was deep in thought over this unexpected news.

Being a Supreme Court justice, Chae Eunseok was required to maintain a high level of integrity and moral standing, limiting his recognition among the general public. This was why he needed Chairman Jung Jaekwang.

Jung Jaekwang, chairman of the Saeryeon Group, was one of Korea’s most respected corporate leaders, and for Eunseok, having his daughter marry the son of such an esteemed figure would be a point of pride. This could pave his way into politics.

“It’s a shame to give up next year’s election, but since we’ve parted ways with Chairman Jung Jaekwang…”

Eunseok’s voice trailed off, reflecting his mixed emotions. After some thought, Eunyeop offered his opinion.

“It may take a little longer to enter politics, but the Chief Justice position could be a good way to raise your profile.”

“Profile as Chief Justice?” Eunseok scoffed. The Chief Justice is ranked third in Korea’s protocol hierarchy, following the President and the Speaker of the National Assembly. Despite this, the general public often pays more attention to ministers or assembly members.

“It’s all in how you approach it. I’d suggest preparing impactful statements that resonate with the public during the confirmation hearing.”

As he mulled over Eunyeop’s idea, Eunseok stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“You could make a lasting impression as a distinguished Chief Justice, and instead of running for a mere National Assembly seat, you could go straight for a presidential bid. Plus, you wouldn’t have to serve out the entire Chief Justice term.”

Eunyeop’s spirited support made Eunseok laugh heartily. That would indeed be the best path.

After sharing a laugh, Eunseok inquired about his daughter.

“And Eunbi?”

“I met Ham Daegun, CEO of Daegun Trading, today. He seems to like her.”

“Ham Daegun… combative but a man who knows his manners. And Eunbi?”

“She doesn’t seem to dislike him.”

“Convince her well. It will be good for her.”

“Yes, Father.”

“You may not be able to buy happiness with money, but it’s true that the more you have, the happier you can be.”

At his father Seobok’s philosophy, Eunyeop nodded in agreement. He had always felt a sense of inferiority toward those wealthier than him. Despite holding high honors, he had often faced frustration due to financial constraints, so he resonated deeply with Seobok’s words.

In truth, most second-generation chaebols are just rich idiots.

Eunyeop believed that he and his father, with their intelligence and the good they contributed to society, deserved to be the most successful people in the world.

“When I become Chief Justice, I’ll need to act even more transparently. It may feel restrictive for you as well.”

“You pursue honor, Father. Leave all the funding to me.”

Eunyeop responded confidently. This gave him a solid reason to speed up Eunbi’s marriage plans.

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“I’m home!”

Jung-oh returned home after her night shift. As always, Yena ran over to greet her with joy.

“Mom!”

“Princess Yena!”

As Jung-oh picked Yena up, Guk-soon and Jiheon also approached, creating a new scene for today.

“Did you eat dinner?”

Usually, it was Guk-soon who asked this, but today Jiheon did.

“Yes.”

“With whom?”

The follow-up question was different, though.

Having had dinner with Deputy Manager Gwak Dongjae, who had recently joined, Jung-oh didn’t answer.

“Mom, my doll ripped. Can you sew it?”

As if sensing her mother’s hesitation, Yena quickly changed the topic with her request.

“Oh, did it rip? I’ll sew it for you. Let’s go!”

Jung-oh promptly took Yena’s hand and headed to Yena’s room.

The doll Yena mentioned was a kangaroo doll that Jung-oh had brought back from a business trip to Australia.

“Where’s the baby kangaroo?”

“It’s with the koala.”

“Bring all your torn dolls over. I’ll sew them all up.”

Following her mom’s instructions, Yena bustled around, gathering her dolls. Among the toys she had brought when they moved, several were torn. Jung-oh carefully stitched each one.

Yena took the baby kangaroo doll, putting it in and out of the mother kangaroo’s pouch, and spoke to Jung-oh.

“Mom, Dobin’s getting a new sibling. So he’ll have two younger siblings now.”

“Do you think he likes it? How does he feel?”

“Dobin says it’s hard to look after his younger sibling. But I was a bit jealous.”

“Why were you jealous?”

“I thought it would be more fun to play if I had a sibling too.”

“Would you like to have a sibling, Yena?”

“Yes.”

Yena answered without hesitation.

“If you get a sibling, will you be kind to them?”

“Yes. I’ll be very sweet to them.”

“Won’t you feel sad if Mom only takes care of your sibling?”

“You can take care of me too, Mom.”

“Even so. You might feel like your love is being taken away.”

At her mother’s hypothetical, Yena slowly nodded.

“It’s okay if you love my sibling.”

“…….”

“But don’t take away my love.”

“…….”

“I want you to love my sibling, and love me a lot too.”

Because even if you keep receiving love, it’s never enough.

Yena’s honest and slightly selfish response pierced deep into Jung-oh’s heart.

It looked like a marriage announcement was coming soon. She had no idea if the impact would be big or small, but it was something that required a firm mental preparation, and she needed to look out for Yena first. There was still unfinished business to handle.

Jiheon was peeking around the doorway. Noticing him, Jung-oh gave him a small nod before speaking up.

“Yena, it’s time to change your name. You’re going to be Jung Yena now, not Lee Yena.”

At the unexpected topic, Yena stared at her mom, speechless.

“Since your dad is Jung Jiheon, you’ll become Jung Yena too, just like Dobin has his dad’s last name, Park Dobin.”

“…….”

“You understand, right?”

Yena recalled something the police officer had once said. So this is what it meant to change names, she realized.

“Does everyone do this?”

“Yes, everyone does. And when your sibling is born, they’ll do the same.”

“You’re not doing this because you don’t want to be Lee Yena’s mom, right?”

The child’s eyes were beginning to glisten with tears.

“If I become Jung Yena, will you still stay with me?”

“Of course.”

Jung-oh answered with reassuring confidence at her daughter’s anxious question.

She knew it would be hard for Yena to let go of the seven years she’d lived as Lee Yena. When she came home without washing her hands, when she stubbornly wanted ice cream, when she stayed up giggling instead of going to bed, Jung-oh would probably call her “Lee Yena” out of habit from time to time.

Yena would likely do the same. When someone called “Lee Yena,” she might answer out of habit or flinch slightly.

“I’ll always stay by you, Yena. For as long as you want me to, for as long as you need me. I’ll be with you forever.”

Jung-oh pulled her daughter, with her tear-filled, sparkling eyes, close and hugged her tightly.

“I could never be apart from you.”

My lovely, precious girl.

“From the moment you were born—no, even from long before then—we were meant to be together.”

My angel. I will love you forever.

Ch122 - Go Tournament

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Jeong-o, Ji-heon, and Ye-na went to the district office together at noon to complete the registration process. Since the two had already registered their marriage, they were able to change Ye-na's surname and family name without any difficulties.

Holding the family relationship certificate with her name on it, Ye-na looked dazed. Although it must feel strange, like clothes that don't quite fit her body yet, the kids will soon get used to it.

Changing the child's name, informing the daycare and the academy about the change, reapplying for the child's go tournament registration, and the busy days passed. Before they knew it, Thursday morning had arrived.

While Ji-heon was getting ready for work, Jeong-o declared, "I'm taking a day off tomorrow."

"Why?" Ji-heon asked.

"We have to go with Ye-na to the go tournament."

Tomorrow was the day Ye-na would participate in the go tournament. Although the academy's director would escort the kids, Ye-na was still quite young and needed a guardian.

Ji-heon responded to Jeong-o's announcement, "Then let's go together."

"You should go to work. We don't work at different companies. If both of us take a day off, people will think it's strange."

“We’re going to reveal everything soon anyway.”

“If we reveal that we registered our marriage, it might lead to even more gossip. It’s not like the kid is sick, and we’re taking a day off because she’s in a go tournament.”

Ji-heon sulked at Jeong-o’s refusal.

I want to go, too! I want to follow Ye-na to the go tournament!

However, Jeong-o ignored Ji-heon’s displeased expression.

“Besides, you have an important role at work. You need to work hard. You can’t slack off.”

“I think you’re the one with a more important role.”

“Of course, I’m more capable, but I can’t surpass you in position. You’re going to work.”

Jeong-o systematically outlined the reasons why she had to go with Ye-na. Ji-heon crossed his arms and glared at Jeong-o.

“Can you take our daughter to the women’s restroom, like I can? Of course, I have to take her. Daughters need their moms.”

“What are you talking about? Daughters need their dads.”

The voices of the two rose in volume. Hearing them argue, Ye-na approached the room and peeked in.

“Stop insisting. As a department head, don’t be irresponsible and try to slack off at work. Don’t use our daughter as an excuse—just go to work.”

“Then let our daughter choose. Mom or Dad?”

Ji-heon ultimately left the decision up to Ye-na. Bringing Ye-na into the room, he gently swept her hair aside and faced Jeong-o.

“Who would you choose, your mom who doesn’t even know the first thing about go, or your dad who will always be your go buddy?”

“I know the word ‘go’!” Jeong-o shot back, flaring up.

“Right. The only thing you know is the two characters for ‘go’, while Dad can play a match with Ye-na anytime!”

“Princess Ye-na, let’s go with Mom. All the other kids will be going with their moms, so it would be a bit weird for you to go with Dad.”

Jeong-o also tried to persuade Ye-na. The little girl’s big eyes darted back and forth between her mom and dad. After a moment of contemplation, she sought Jeong-o’s permission.

“Mom, I’ll go with Dad tomorrow.”

Yes! Ji-heon clenched his fist and shook it triumphantly, while Jeong-o stood there in shock with her mouth agape.

My daughter is abandoning me.

“…Why?”

“Because it’s a go tournament. If it were an art contest, I would go with Mom, but this is a go tournament.”

“Ha. An art contest? Are you even thinking about entering one?”

As Jeong-o questioned Ye-na, Ji-heon lifted Ye-na high into the air and hid her behind his back.

“Ah-ha! Whether it’s an art contest or a go tournament, if our Ye-na is participating, we’re going! Right, Princess Ye-na?”

“Yeah!”

With Dad supporting her, Ye-na smiled happily, making it impossible for Jeong-o to resent her, though her lips did stick out in a pout.

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Another day passed, and the morning of the go tournament arrived.

Ji-heon, Jeong-o, and Ye-na drove together. Ji-heon first dropped Jeong-o off in front of her company.

“Ye-na, have a great time at the tournament!”

“Okay!”

“Don’t feel too pressured; it’s fine if you lose. Just have fun like you usually do. Got it?”

“Okay!”

“Make sure to keep your phone around your neck. If anything happens, you must tell Dad. Understood?”

The disappointment of a mother who couldn’t follow her daughter was evident in her voice. Jeong-o, reluctant to leave the car, tightly gripped the door handle and urged Ji-heon as well.

“Don’t lose track of Ye-na; you must keep your eyes on her at all times.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Ah. I’m so frustrated. I should be the one going.”

“I know, it’s a pity we can’t go together. Just relax.”

Hmph. Jeong-o snorted at Ji-heon’s tone, which felt teasing and not sincere.

“Bye, Mom!”

Unaware of her mother’s feelings, the child cheerfully waved goodbye.

Ji-heon and Ye-na arrived at the venue early. The national children’s go tournament, held at the Olympic Handball Stadium, had hundreds of kids

gathered.

Although Ji-heon had learned go since he was young, it was his first time at a tournament. He held Ye-na's hand tightly, feeling more nervous than she was, which made him chuckle at himself.

Eventually, they met with the academy director at the designated spot. Ye-na recognized the director first and greeted her.

"Hello, teacher!"

"Hello, Ye-na! Your father is here!"

"Teacher, my dad is really good at go."

"Ah, so he's a skilled player!"

"I only know how to play a little," Ji-heon replied modestly.

The tournament was divided into lower and upper grade divisions and was conducted in a tournament style. Seven-year-old Ye-na was registered in the lower grade division. Since there weren't many children her age, she was likely to face older competitors.

The director handed out name tags to the children. Ye-na received a name tag that read "Jeong Ye-na." Ji-heon helped her put it around her neck.

"Well, the organizers have made the pairings so that you will meet players of the same age in the first round."

"It seems that way."

"Anyway, if you keep winning in the matches, you might even face nine- or ten-year-olds, but Ye-na is so good. I'm sure you'll do great. It will be a good experience for you."

The director praised Ye-na while explaining the tournament to Ji-heon.

Time passed, and an announcement came over the speakers.

“We will now begin the tournament. Guardians, please wait in the spectator area, and participating children should enter the tournament room and line up by group.”

It was time to part ways with Ye-na.

“Ye-na, have fun competing like you do at home with Dad. I’ll be watching from the seat I was sitting in earlier.”

“Okay! I’ll win!”

Ye-na replied energetically, waving her hand confidently.

Now, Ye-na was on her own. Following her teacher’s guidance, she stood in front of the D-group sign before entering the tournament room. On the tables lined up, there were go boards and stones. Looking around, she noticed that the other kids were of similar height.

Ye-na thought they must be friends her age. She felt excited and glad to meet other kids her age who enjoyed go.

“Children with mobile phones, please turn them off and submit them. You can take your phones back when you leave the tournament.”

Another announcement came. Ye-na submitted her phone to the supervisor, who wrote her name on it and put it in an envelope.

Now, the tournament was about to begin.

“We will greet each other and determine the order of play.”

The boy sitting across from Ye-na was wearing round glasses. He greeted her first.

“Hi, I’m Kang Sae-byul.”

“I’m… Jeong Ye-na.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m seven.”

“Wow. Really? I’m also seven.”

Ye-na wasn’t very skilled at returning the boy’s greeting. During the process of determining the order of play, Ye-na ended up starting with black stones, giving up six and a half points. She felt nervous right from the start. However, being nervous didn’t make her lose focus.

In fact, it allowed her to immerse herself even more in the match. Ye-na easily won against her first opponent.

“Wow! You’re really good. You’re going to be first!”

The boy, who had only thought of Ye-na as a competitor, didn’t seem sad at all after losing the first match; instead, he praised her. Only then did Ye-na manage to smile.

“Thank you. I had fun playing with you.”

Ye-na greeted the boy just as she had learned at the academy.

After the match, she turned to look back. She spotted her dad sitting in the audience. Ji-heon was only looking at his phone, which left Ye-na a bit disappointed.

She didn’t know that Ji-heon, the enthusiastic dad, had his phone set to 100x zoom to get a better view of Ye-na from afar and was recording her.

Regardless, Ji-heon was watching Ye-na on his phone screen, and when their eyes met, he waved and smiled brightly at her.

Ye-na easily won her second and third matches. Soon, she faced her opponent from Group C. Having won three matches in a row, she felt a boost of confidence. Now, she thought she could enjoy the matches too.

But a dark cloud loomed over Ye-na.

“Are you in the tournament too?”

Her fourth opponent was Hong Jae-in.

He was the older brother of Hong Su-in, who had previously attended Ye-na's go academy. He had pressured her to call her dad when she was younger.

However, Ye-na was startled not because of that.

"Teacher, can you switch my opponent?"

"What's the matter?"

"This kid is seven years old. Why would I compete against a seven-year-old?"

"Hong Jae-in, you should look at skill, not age. Jeong Ye-na is here sitting and has also beaten three players like our Hong Jae-in."

As Jae-in complained to the supervisor, he was met with a firm response.

Jae-in smirked condescendingly at Ye-na, pouting his lips.

"But you can clearly see there's a huge difference in skill."

However, Ye-na couldn't hear Jae-in's words. Her ears felt muffled.

"By the way, why is your name Jeong Ye-na and not Lee Ye-na?"

"…"

"I guess there are really no players at that academy if they sent you out."

"…"

"I'll show you how it's done."

"…"

"You learn by losing in go, you know."

Despite Jae-in’s taunts, Ye-na couldn’t say a word. Jae-in thought she was scared of him, which only made him smirk more. Even though he insisted on taking black stones, Ye-na remained silent.

Her gaze was fixed beyond Jae-in’s back, towards Group A. It was directed at a woman.

The woman she had met in front of the go academy. The one who had forcefully grabbed her hand while wearing a hat pulled down low, leaving her alone on an unfamiliar road. It was definitely her. That woman was now overseeing the go tournament.

Jae-in placed a stone in the center of the board first.

“What are you doing? Hurry up.”

He urged Ye-na, who was still staring blankly. As she reached into the bowl of stones, her hands trembled. Her heart raced as if it wanted to flee from the tournament.

No!

Hurry. Come on! I need to focus on the match!

Despite her determination, tears welled up and obscured her vision.

With great effort, she placed a stone, but it fell carelessly onto the board.

Ch123 - Call Mom

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– How’s your schedule today? I’ve cleared my evening for Eunbi.

Eunbi stared at her phone, unable to find the right words to reply to Ham Daegun’s text message. Every time her stomach churned, her anxiety grew stronger.

On Tuesday, Daegun had sent a message with trivial greetings about the weather. She responded politely, and since then, he had strongly hinted at wanting to meet again. She had refused, citing work, until yesterday, but she couldn’t keep using that excuse for three days straight.

Just as tears threatened to spill again, her phone vibrated. It was her friend BJ. Startled, Eunbi answered the call as she fiddled with her phone.

[What are you going to do now?]
Before Eunbi could ask what was wrong, BJ shouted first.

[The police called me to come in for questioning. It’s for defamation, they say. What are you going to do about this!]
So it had finally happened. Lee Jeong-o must have pressed charges against BJ for spreading false information. Feeling the pressure from BJ’s relentless questioning, Eunbi snapped back.

“Did I do that? You’re the one who posted the video.”

BJ let out a frustrated sigh, seemingly incredulous.

[You said it was okay for me to post it! You said we only had one camera, so no one would know!]

“When did I say that? You started this mess, so why are you mad at me?”

[Eunbi Chae, do you think I don’t have any evidence that this was your plan? My friends remember you coaxing me into this. I have text messages as proof.]
With BJ bringing up evidence, Eunbi immediately changed her tone. Her voice lowered and became calm.

“Well, it’s a defamation case anyway. Besides, it got resolved quickly, and there wasn’t much damage, right? The police won’t care about something like this. It will just blow over.”

[…….]
“You know my brother is a lawyer, right? If I tell him, there won’t be any issues. This will just pass as a little incident.”

[I don’t care. You take responsibility. Tell your brother to send a lawyer with me when I go to the police station, got it?]
BJ didn’t press further after Eunbi’s attempts to calm her down and hung up after issuing a warning.

Eunbi immediately called Eunyeob. He picked up quickly but didn’t say anything. Eunbi had no choice but to speak first.

“Hyung. My friend is being sued. It’s BJ, the one who posted the video of Lee Jeong-o’s restaurant. They said she has to come in for questioning.”

Eunyeob let out a long sigh, fully aware of the trouble Eunbi had caused. He knew she would be receiving a lecture about the foolishness of her actions, and her voice gradually grew smaller in anticipation of it.

“…You’ll go with me, right?”

Surprisingly, Eunyeob didn’t get angry.

[I’ll handle your friend’s issue, so you go meet Ham Daegun today.]
Instead, he laid down a condition.

“No, that’s not the point right now…”

[Is this really the time for you to be stubborn? If you act that way, what will happen to my reputation?]
Eunyeob interrupted her. His voice, while attempting to sound calm, was filled with irritation.

[Do you think a guy like Jeong Jiheon would actually be good for you? You know how rare it is for a guy like Ham Daegun to like someone like you?]
Eunbi was well aware that she fell short in every aspect compared to her brother. But it wasn't that she was completely useless. She felt pathetic for shrinking in front of her brother.

[Chae Eunbi. You should ditch that piece of trash like Jeong Jiheon and drive a good car. Ham Daegun can marry you right away, you know. The marriage you've always wanted.]
Seeing Eunbi sulking without a response, Eunyeob put even more effort into convincing her.

[He's really a good person. I'm recommending him because he's a good person. If you marry Ham Daegun, you won't even have to worry about petty lawsuits like this. He can cover for you no matter what you do; he'll take care of everything for you.]
"…Is that really true?"

Eunbi finally showed interest in Eunyeob's words as they flowed on. One hand, not holding the phone, slowly caressed her lower abdomen.

"Can he really… wrap me up no matter what I do? That person?"

[Of course. Without a doubt. He'd even cover for murder. He's completely fallen for you; there's nothing he wouldn't do.]
Eunyeob answered without hesitation to Eunbi's doubtful question.

Cover for murder… The words made Eunbi's heart race.

[Get a marriage promise from him today. You can do it. You're capable, right?]
Earlier, he had said she couldn't do anything right.

Eunbi snorted at the contradictory words but didn’t mind the praise. With a somewhat satisfied heart, she ended the call.

As soon as she hung up, her phone rang again, startling her. The screen showed a notification from the Gangnam Police Station.

With trembling hands, Eunbi answered the call.

“Hello?”

[Is this Teacher Chae Eunbi?]
“Yes, it is. What’s this about?”

[Hello. This is Gangnam Police Station. A complaint has been filed against you.]
“…Me? A complaint has been filed against me directly?”

[Yes. Therefore, we need you to come in for questioning.]
“What are the charges?”

[It’s for defamation by spreading false information.]
Eunbi remembered that Jeong Jiheon had a recording of their conversation. Jeong Jiheon was chillingly persistent. Just thinking about facing him made her feel lightheaded.

After hanging up, Eunbi quickly texted Ham Daegun. She was now feeling urgent. She thought that he was the only one who could protect her at this moment.

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Spectator Seats at the Tournament.

As Eunbi watched Yeona effortlessly win three matches, Jiheon felt a wave of overwhelming emotion. The child placed her stones in the right spots and knew how to put pressure on her opponents.

While watching Yeona, Jiheon received a text message. It was a notification that the complaint had reached the defendants. Jiheon had sued Eunbi, and

Jeong O had sued Eunbi's friend, BJ. The two of them would soon be questioned at the police station.

Jiheon wanted to sue the main culprit, Chae Eunyeob, for impersonating another lawyer and botching the paternity test, but he hadn't done so yet. With Eunyeob's snake-like nature as a lawyer, it would be easy for him to wriggle out of this situation, and there was a lack of evidence.

It would have been helpful if the genetic research center could cooperate, but they dragged their feet, citing laws and security concerns. Their stance was that since Jiheon's paternity had been confirmed, there wasn't much harm done.

While checking on matters outside the tournament hall, it was already time for the fourth match.

"Father, have you thought about Yeona's future?"

As Jiheon filmed Yeona preparing for the match, the academy director approached him.

"Does Yeona not say she wants to become a professional Go player?"

"I haven't asked her yet. She just says she enjoys playing Go. When I asked if she would still be happy even if she lost, she said she'd think about it after the match."

In the midst of answering, he briefly lost sight of Yeona. Jiheon's phone camera panned around until it found Yeona again.

This time, it was a match against Group C. Since Yeona was facing off against Group C, Jiheon couldn't see her face from the spectator seats. Still, he couldn't change his spot and recorded the match with a heavy heart.

But for some reason, after the match began, Yeona didn't move at all for quite a while. A close-up through the zoom revealed that her hands seemed a bit different than usual. It looked like her fingertips were trembling.

Noticing that something was off with Yeona, Jiheon shifted the camera to the child sitting across from her. Upon recognizing Yeona’s opponent, his heart sank.

“Yeona’s opponent… is Hong Jaein.”

“Excuse me?”

The academy director also seemed startled and got up from his seat.

Jiheon kept a close eye on Yeona’s actions.

He noticed Yeona, who rarely made mistakes, dropping her Go stone. He saw Hong Jaein picking up the stone and sneering at her.

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Thud.

The sound of Yeona dropping her Go stone echoed loudly.

“Are you forfeiting?”

The tournament supervisor looked at Yeona and asked. Nearby officials also turned their gaze toward her. The woman was looking at Yeona too. In that moment, Yeona’s eyes met the woman’s, and the woman quickly turned her head away.

“Are you already scared?”

Jaein mocked Yeona.

“No. She just dropped her Go stone!”

Jaein shouted toward the supervisor, as if to say she was willing to overlook it this once, and picked up Yeona’s stone, handing it back to her. Yeona placed the stone in the spot where it belonged.

Jaein continued her relentless attack. The sound of the stones being placed on the board resounded sharply, causing Yeona's shoulders to shrink in response.

It was hard for her to concentrate. Her mother's words from that morning echoed in her mind.

"Don't feel too much pressure since it's okay to lose. Just play and have fun like you usually do, alright?"

Am I having fun right now?

No. I'm not having fun.

This was not a situation where she could enjoy the match. In this state, it felt impossible to learn anything even if she lost. Her heart raced uncontrollably, feeling tight and heavy.

Her body was at the Go board, but her mind was focused on the woman. But she was also scared of the woman looking at her again, or coming closer.

"Teacher."

Yeona raised one hand high, calling for the supervisor.

"I want to quit."

Jaein raised her eyebrows, as if in disbelief, and scoffed at her. Yet she didn't seem entirely displeased to win by forfeit.

Yeona turned to the supervisor who approached her and said, "Please give me my phone back."

When the seven-year-old asked with a trembling voice, the supervisor moved quickly.

Yeona turned to look at the audience. She couldn't see her dad where he was supposed to be. No matter where she looked in the stands, her dad was

nowhere to be found. The absence of her dad made her feel even more anxious.

Yeona searched for her dad, scanning her surroundings. In the process, she spotted the woman again. The woman seemed to be heading somewhere in a hurry, possibly toward the exit.

“This is your phone, right? Quickly call your mom.”

The supervisor turned on the phone for Yeona, who looked dazed.

Her dad had come, but why was she being told to call her mom? While puzzling over this strange question, she thought of her mom again. She remembered what her mom had said when she bought her the phone.

“Yeona, this isn’t because you cried for it. It’s for calling me immediately if a suspicious person appears. Got it?”

Yeona immediately pressed the speed dial number 1. Her mom answered the phone promptly, as if she had been waiting.

[Princess Yeona! Is the tournament over?]
“Mom, I saw that lady. The lady who took me somewhere strange.”

Yeona reported the situation in a hesitant voice.

Her mom understood immediately from the brief explanation. Her voice turned serious.

[Where are you?]
“Here at the tournament.”

[Inside the tournament hall?]
“Yeah.”

[Lee Yeona.]
Mom called me Lee Yeona. But now I’m Jeong Yeona.

However, I could understand my mom’s feelings. She was just as scared as I was right now.

Yeona answered with a trembling heart.

“Yeah.”

[You said you’re at the tournament hall, right? There are a lot of people around you?]
“Yeah.”

[Don’t tremble. It’s okay.]
No, Mom wasn’t scared.

[Take a picture. Then shout!] Mom’s urgent voice pierced Yeona’s ears.

Ch124 - To the Police Station

Please support me on ko-fi.com/benj1104
12 PM. Noon.
Except when they were together, Jiheon always texted Jeong-oh at noon. For some time now, Jeong-oh had come to associate the sound of his phone vibrating with the thought, “Ah, it’s noon.”

But it had been a while since Jiheon had sent a message.

Jeong-oh began to worry about both Yeona and Jiheon.

“Maybe I should have just gone with them.”

No, it would have been too obvious if both were absent. It was just a Go tournament, after all.

Jeong-oh shook his head, thinking his judgment was correct, and let out a deep sigh.

“If they announce their marriage in the future…”

Jiheon had suggested they have a wedding and go on a honeymoon. But would it be too much of a strain for two people from the same department to be absent for several days?

“Would it be better if I transferred to another department?”

His worries, which started with Yeona’s Go tournament, drifted far away. As he was lost in thought, Assistant Ko Eun-joo asked him a question.

“What are you doing? You should go for lunch, right?”

“I have something on my mind.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“They said we can officially announce our marriage.”

Assuming it was work-related, Eun-joo’s expression darkened. She let out a hollow exclamation.

“Oh. That’ll be a big deal.”

“Exactly. Should we just burst out with it at once, or wait until everyone knows and look for a good opportunity to make it official? I can’t decide.”

“Why are you worrying about that?”

Eun-joo’s reaction suggested she felt there was no need for concern.

“Once you have three men around you, the director will take care of announcing it.”

“……”

“You just sit back and watch the director make the announcement. After it’s done, you can just scold him. That should give you material to complain about for at least 20 years!”

Jeong-oh couldn’t help but laugh at Eun-joo’s clever, calculated solution.

Ko Eun-joo and Jeong Ji-heon. They both found each other unpleasant, but perhaps due to the similarities in their personalities, Jeong-oh got along well with Eun-joo. Both were sometimes impulsive, bursting with energy, which was quite similar to Jiheon.

I guess I match well with this kind of person.

As Jeong-oh got into the elevator with Eun-joo, he said, “Do you know, Assistant Ko, you and Jiheon have quite similar personalities?”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me?” Eun-joo replied, her tone sharp.

“No, it’s a good thing. I’m saying that both of you have quick judgment and rationality. That’s why I like you.”

“Such a confession doesn’t make me happy at all. Besides, how is the director rational? I’ve never seen anyone so emotional. Plus, he can be so demanding and picky.”

Eun-joo began to list Jiheon’s undeniable flaws. However, she quickly stopped. After all, Jiheon and Jeong-oh were married; it didn’t seem right to point out her husband’s flaws to his wife.

“But still, just because you’re close to the director doesn’t mean I’ll dislike him any more than I do, so don’t worry too much.”

Eun-joo promptly redirected the conversation. Meanwhile, Jeong-oh quietly chuckled to himself, thinking they were indeed similar.

As they got off the elevator and started walking, his phone vibrated. Thinking it was Jiheon contacting him, he quickly checked, but to his surprise, it was Yeona.

Jeong-oh’s face brightened, and he answered the call.

“Princess Yeona! Did the tournament end?”

But along with Yeona’s voice, Jeong-oh’s expression darkened.

[Mom. I saw that lady. The lady who took me somewhere strange.] Even though the child must have been scared, she conveyed the news quite clearly. Thanks to that, Jeong-oh quickly grasped what Yeona was saying.

“Where?”

[Here at the tournament.] “Inside the venue?”

[Yes.] “Yeona.”

[Yes.] “You said at the tournament? There are a lot of people around, right?”

[Yes.] “Don’t be scared. It’s okay.”

He tried to reassure the child. Although he felt his own heart racing, he knew he had to keep his composure.

The fact that the child reached out to him meant Jiheon was not in sight. Still, Jiheon would likely be following close behind, but they could lose sight of the woman in the meantime. He needed to protect Yeona and catch the woman.

“Take a picture. Then shout!”

Take a picture. Shout. If she could do one of those things properly, they might be able to catch the culprit.

“Yeona! Shout out!”

His urgent plea went unanswered, and the call ended.

Haah, haah, haah.

Jeong-oh felt breathless, as if he had just run a 100-meter sprint.

“What happened?”

As soon as the call ended, Eun-joo, startled by his heavy breathing, asked.

“Yeona! Yeona! Yeona!”

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!”

“……”

“Quickly! Hurry!”

By repeating “Yeona,” Eun-joo understood the situation and immediately hailed a taxi. The taxi arrived right in front of them. Eun-joo opened the door and said,

“Go solve this and come back quickly.”

“Thank you, Assistant Ko. I’ll be back soon.”

Jeong-oh sincerely appreciated Eun-joo’s prompt action as he got into the car.

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As soon as Yeona raised her hand to declare her resignation, Jiheon quickly stood up and ran toward the entrance of the tournament hall.

He had to take quite a detour to find an unlocked entrance. When he finally managed to get inside, he bumped shoulders with someone—a woman dressed in ivory-colored clothing.

“I’m sorry…”

In that moment, he heard a child’s voice from inside the hall.

“Mommy!”

It was clearly Yeona’s voice. Jiheon, forgetting to apologize to the woman, rushed inside. A male supervisor hurried over, trying to block him from entering, but Jiheon easily brushed him aside.

He spotted Yeona standing close to where he had been watching the game all along.

All the children had stopped their games to look at Yeona.

“Yeona!”

“Daddy!”

Jiheon quickly ran over and scooped Yeona into his arms.

“Did Yeona get scared?”

“Dad, over there!”

He had meant to comfort her, but as soon as she was in his arms, the child pointed towards the entrance.

“That lady who just went out is the one who took me! The one who took me somewhere strange in front of the academy!”

Jiheon flinched and looked back.

So, that was the woman he had bumped shoulders with earlier?

“Wait here for a moment.”

Jiheon set Yeona down and rushed outside. The woman was nowhere to be found. He checked outside the venue, but she was still not visible.

Returning to Yeona, Jiheon took her with him to the main desk.

“Hello. Can you tell me about the supervisor who just went out the entrance?”

The chief supervisor approached him.

“What seems to be the problem?”

Given Yeona’s loud voice and Jiheon’s bustling around the tournament hall, the chief supervisor seemed to think this was quite an unusual occurrence.

“I’m trying to find out about the supervisor in charge of today’s event. There’s someone among them who seems suspicious.”

“Which suspicious person are you talking about?”

“My daughter almost got kidnapped once. The woman who tried to take her then resembles the supervisor I saw today.”

“So your child said that?”

The supervisor narrowed his eyes, looking skeptically at Yeona.

“Dad, I took a picture.”

Yeona opened her phone’s photo gallery and showed him the picture. It was small, but recognizable.

“This is the person who just exited the tournament hall. There are plenty of cameras around, so if you could let me see the CCTV footage, it might be easier to identify her. Or even a list of current departures…”

“It’s difficult right now as the event is ongoing. Please come back after the tournament ends, and I’ll help you then.”

The chief supervisor interrupted Jiheon’s speech.

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A taxi arrived in front of the tournament hall. Jeong-oh happened to run into Jiheon just as he was leaving the venue.

“Mommy!”

“Yeona!”

Yeona ran over, and Jeong-oh hugged her tightly.

“Are you okay? Did you get hurt?”

“Yes. But, Mommy, we couldn’t catch that lady.”

As Jeong-oh looked at Jiheon, he explained what had happened inside the tournament hall.

“According to Yeona, the woman was a supervisor at the tournament. It seems she brushed past me as well.”

“She brushed past you?”

“She was the one leaving the tournament hall as I was entering.”

“……”

“The woman left in the middle of supervising the tournament. I tried to find out about the list of people who left, but the supervisor told me to come back after the tournament. I’m not sure if they’ll cooperate, but I’ve at least gotten the contact information of the chief supervisor.”

“Mom, Yeona took a picture.”

As Jiheon’s explanation stretched on, Yeona chimed in. She quickly showed the picture she had taken.

Even though he had firmly told her to take a picture, seeing the photo made Jeong-oh’s heart ache. He thought about how scared the child must have been, and the fact that she captured that moment felt even more remarkable.

“First, let’s take this to the police station. If we report it to them, they’ll take care of the investigation. The woman in this photo resembles the one from the video we received before.”

Jeong-oh, Jiheon, and Yeona headed to the police station together. On their way, Jeong-oh called Detective Bae. He had exchanged messages with Bae in the past, so he had his personal phone number.

Detective Bae answered the call quickly.

“Detective, hello. This is Jeong-oh, Yeona’s mom.”

[Yes, hello.] A polite voice came from the other end of the line, and the response felt somewhat slow.

“I’m calling about the woman who attempted to kidnap Yeona some time ago.”

Upon hearing Jeong-oh bring it up, Detective Bae’s reaction became even slower than before.

[Yes, go ahead.] “Today, Yeona saw that woman at the go tournament. She also took a picture. I thought it would be easier to identify her with the police’s help, so I contacted you.”

[Then, I would like you to come to the police station. Do you have time?]
“Yes. I’m on my way now.”

[Yes. Please come to the Criminal Investigation Department of the Criminal Investigation Division. How long will it take you to get here?]
“I just left, so it will take about 20 minutes.”

[Okay, understood.]
After Jeong-oh hung up, Jiheon asked,

“Is he the police officer who gave you the go board and the coin?”

“Yes.”

“What’s his name?”

“Kwon Bae-il. Detective Kwon Bae-il.”

The three of them arrived at the police station exactly 20 minutes later, just as they had told Bae-il. He was waiting outside the police station building.

“Detective, you’re out here.”

As Jeong-oh got out of the car, she greeted Bae-il.

At Jeong-oh’s greeting, Jiheon shifted his gaze to Bae-il. He saw a well-built man walking toward them. Jiheon had expected a burly police officer, but instead, he was tall and handsome.

Jiheon was surprised by this unexpected appearance, but more than that, he felt a strange sense of familiarity that made his head spin.

Soon, the four of them stood face to face.

“Hello, Yeona.”

“Hello, uncle.”

Bae-il was the first to greet Yeona.

After Yeona greeted him, Jiheon extended his hand to Bae-il.

“Hello. I’m Jeong Ji-heon, Yeona’s dad. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Bae-il looked at Jiheon’s outstretched hand for a moment before slowly shaking it.

“…Kwon Bae-il.”

Ch125 - Pursuit

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Bae-il lightly waved their joined hands and smiled softly.

“I hear you’ve heard a lot about me.”

“Yeah. I heard you lived next door.”

“Have you heard my name before?”

“…I heard it for the first time today.”

Ji-heon’s dry response to Bae-il’s question surprised Jeong-o. Ji-heon’s face was noticeably stiff, even more so than when they had met at the tournament venue.

The atmosphere between Ji-heon and Bae-il felt strangely tense, as if they were engaged in a silent battle of politeness in Jeong-o’s eyes.

Jeong-o quickly changed the subject.

“Officer, what brings you here?”

“I’m on my way back after running an errand. It seemed urgent, so I rushed over. Let’s go in together.”

Jeong-o, Ji-heon, and Yena followed Bae-il into the police station.

As they passed through the entrance, Jeong-o handed Bae-il a photo taken by Yena.

“This is a photo Yena took at the tournament today. She was wearing an ivory-colored outfit and bumped into my husband. My husband tried to chase after her, but she had already disappeared.”

“Let’s compare the photo Yena took today with the CCTV footage we obtained earlier.”

The three followed Bae-il through the entrance to the detective division. Compared to the cluttered desks of other detectives, Bae-il’s desk was surprisingly neat, much like his polished image.

“There’s an empty interrogation room, so it would be best to examine it there.”

Bae-il picked up the laptop from his desk and led the way. Ji-heon, Jeong-o, and Yena followed behind.

In the interrogation room, the four of them compared Yena’s photo with the previous CCTV recordings. Bae-il paused the CCTV video at the angle that most closely matched the new photo Yena had taken.

“Both are blurry, but the body shape and facial contours are similar.”

Bae-il remarked, indicating a 90% or higher probability that it was the same person. The identification program’s judgment also supported Yena’s claims.

Jeong-o, with Yena sitting on his lap, tightened his hold around her as he spoke.

“Yena said she recognized her as soon as she saw her.”

“Yena is indeed very smart,” Bae-il smiled as he looked at Yena.

Ji-heon silently observed the scene.

“With this significant evidence, we should be able to obtain cooperation for the investigation more easily. I’ll reach out to the organizers of the Go tournament.”

While Bae-il identified the company organizing the tournament, he received the contact information for the supervising director from Ji-heon and attempted to reach out.

“They said the tournament will wrap up in an hour. You should go check it out with our officer. Unfortunately, I have other matters to attend to this afternoon, so I won’t be able to accompany you. I’m sorry.”

After finishing the call, Bae-il returned and introduced his junior officer, apologizing for not being able to join them.

After greeting the officer in charge of the field investigation, the three of them left the police station. While Jeong-o’s expression brightened with the relief of being able to identify a suspect, Ji-heon’s face remained dark. Jeong-o noticed this and asked with concern.

“Are you okay, Oppa? Your expression has been off since earlier.”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

Ji-heon chose not to reveal any more of his feelings.

Jeong-o also turned his gaze away from Ji-heon and got into the car. After taking a deep breath, he finally had the time to ask Yena about the Go tournament.

“How was the tournament, Yena? Did you enjoy it?”

“Yeah! I won three matches!”

“Three? Wow! You did so well, Yena!”

“Yeah. I could have won the fourth match too, but I couldn’t. I really wanted to win.”

As she answered her mother, Yena’s expression quickly twisted.

“Our Yena really wanted to win. But did you have to stop the match because you saw that lady?”

Yena nodded vigorously, tears streaming down her cheeks as she responded.

“I wanted to win, but I lost…”

Boohoo.

At that moment, it seemed like there was finally space for her shocked heart to cry.

“Our Yena accomplished something more important than the match. You did really well. There will be more opportunities in the future, and you’ll do even better then.”

Jeong-o hugged the child, comforting and encouraging her.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

With the kids on break from daycare, today was also a break from their Go academy, and since Yena couldn’t come over to play and her husband was at work, Jin-seo was left to spend the day with the two kids at home, feeling completely overwhelmed.

Park Do-bin and Park Do-yoon refused to play the same games and constantly fought over who got to have their mother’s attention. Whenever she played with one child, the other would invariably cause trouble.

This time, while playing puzzles with his daughter, Do-bin entered the room and created a mess.

“Park Do-bin, what is this?”

“Eek!”

At the sound of his mother’s voice, Do-bin flinched, dropped what he was holding, and ran away.

Why did he make a mess if he was just going to run away? It was utterly incomprehensible.

What he had done this time was sprinkle white powder on his younger sister’s dollhouse roof and yard, making it look like snow had settled on the roof. Jin-seo remembered watching a movie with the kids about the Snow Queen the day before and couldn’t help but chuckle weakly.

A pill bottle that Do-bin had thrown rolled across the floor. It was the powder medication for injuries—the evidence of the crime.

“Park Do-bin, come here. Let’s talk.”

“You’re not going to hit me?”

“No.”

“Will you forgive me?”

“Yes.”

It takes energy to scold a child.

Gaining confidence that his mother wouldn’t scold him, Do-bin approached.

“Why did you sprinkle this here?”

“I wanted to express a snow-covered house.”

Wanting to express a snow-covered house, but since his mother wouldn’t let him go to the kitchen, he had taken the powder from the medicine cabinet.

“You need to tell me first before doing things like this from now on. Got it?”

“Okay. If I tell you first, will you let me do it?”

“Let’s see.”

Jin-seo smiled. She was charmed by her child’s free imagination, wanting to express a snow-covered house, and decided not to scold her further.

It seemed her child had artistic talent. Should she look into an art academy for her…

However, the tender and kind dreams of the mother did not last long.

After dusting off the powder medication piled high on the dollhouse and cleaning it up, Jin-seo returned to the children with a pale face.

“Park Do-bin!”

Jin-seo’s voice, filled with anger, made the windows of the whole house shake.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Ji-heon, Jeong-o, and Yena met up with the police again in front of the Go tournament venue and entered. The tournament was now approaching the final championship round.

Since the tournament wasn’t over yet, Yena had to watch the matches determining the first and second places on the screen from the stands. Jeong-o was next to Yena, while Ji-heon and the police walked around the venue, inspecting various areas.

After a tight match, when the child who captured the black stone won, Yena clapped her hands without realizing it. Before she knew it, the child had forgotten the disappointment of losing and was watching the match with a pure heart. Jeong-o gently caressed Yena’s face.

Finally, after the award ceremony concluded, the four of them were allowed to enter the tournament hall. In the midst of everyone busily tidying up, they glanced at a man in police uniform. Ji-heon guided him to the head supervisor.

“Hello. We’re from the Gwangjin Police Station.”

“Oh, yes. I received the call. Hello.”

When the police greeted him, the supervisor responded politely. It was an unavoidable situation where they had to actively cooperate with the investigation, as the person they had kicked out a few hours earlier had now shown up with the police.

“We’re looking for this person. They were the supervisor today. Does anyone know her?”

As the police asked the question, they showed a photo taken by Yena. The supervisor squinted at the photo of the woman, staring at it for a while before calling someone else over.

“Oh, it’s her.”

Another supervisor looked at the photo with the same expression and raised his voice.

“I remember she came here after being recommended by the Amateur Go Association for a part-time job.”

The supervisor flipped through some documents he was holding to check the list.

“It says her name is Pyo Ji-ae. However… she’s checked in but hasn’t confirmed her attendance yet. If that’s the case, she won’t be receiving her pay.”

“Do you know where she is now?”

At the police’s follow-up question, the supervisor took out his phone and dialed the number next to ‘Pyo Ji-ae.’ However, after a moment, he shook his head.

“She’s not answering the phone… but there’s a home address listed here.”

Although they couldn’t get in touch immediately, it was a relief to confirm her identity. The four of them secured Pyo Ji-ae’s home address and contact information before leaving the venue.

Since they had identified the suspect, it wasn’t necessary for Yena to stay with them any longer. Jeong-o took Yena home, leaving Ji-heon to accompany the police.

The suspect’s residence was on the third floor of a villa in the residential area of Cheonho-dong. As they got out of the car and looked up at the villa to gauge where the suspect’s home might be, they noticed the open window on the third floor closing.

“I think it’s that house.”

The police nodded in agreement with Ji-heon’s opinion. Just as the two of them were about to ring the doorbell on the third floor, the front door swung open.

However, when the woman standing in front of the door saw someone was there, she immediately tried to close the door. In the meantime, the police quickly intervened.

“This is the police. You are Pyo Ji-ae, right?”

“What? Wh-what’s going on?”

The woman asked in a flustered voice. Ji-heon confirmed the woman’s face from behind the police. It was definitely the woman from Yena’s photo. Behind Pyo Ji-ae was a large travel bag, indicating that she seemed to be in a hurry to leave.

“May I ask you something? Did you happen to pass by the Hagwon area in Hwayang-dong on May 13?”

“May 13? That was two months ago. How could I possibly remember something like that?”

The police showed her a screenshot from the video footage.

“Isn’t the person in the picture you?”

“Oh my, that’s not me. I don’t wear clothes like that. I don’t have a hat like that either. And who’s that kid next to me? I don’t know any kid like that.”

Her reaction seemed almost rehearsed. Pyo Ji-ae, who vehemently denied it, paused for a moment, rolled her eyes as if lost in thought, and then asked the police,

“Wait a minute. You said May 13, right?”

“Yes, May 13.”

“Well, I can tell you something about that. May 13 is my friend’s birthday, and I went to Yeosu to meet her. I arrived around 6 PM.”

Pyo Ji-ae pulled out her phone and showed a photo from her social media account. The post was time-stamped for May 13 at 6:50 PM. The precise date and time made Ji-heon’s face scrunch up.

“Do you see the date and time on the photo? There’s also a location tag.”

It was a solo photo taken in front of a famous sculpture in Yeosu.

Seoul to Yeosu takes over two and a half hours even by high-speed train. Moreover, considering the distance from Hwayang-dong to the station and from Yeosu Station to the location where Pyo Ji-ae took the picture, she could not be the perpetrator of the incident.

If she were the culprit, she couldn’t have been in Yeosu at 6:50 PM on May 13.

However, Ji-heon couldn’t trust Pyo Ji-ae’s words immediately. Although she spoke loudly in protest, she trembled slightly, and her gaze was unstable.

Most importantly, her actions, tone, and eyes reminded him of Cha Eun-bi when she lied and tried to evade responsibility. It seemed that Pyo Ji-ae was hiding something.

Ji-heon glanced at the bag behind Pyo Ji-ae and spoke up.

“It looks like you’re headed somewhere.”

“Yes. I’m going on a trip.”

“You’re going on a trip right after quitting your job as a Go tournament supervisor?”

“Is that not allowed? I had this trip planned all along!”

Sure, that could be possible.

Nodding, Ji-heon turned his attention back to the photo the woman had shown him.

After staring at it for a while, Ji-heon asked again,

“Is this photo from May 13?”

In the photo, all the shops were lit up, except for one place at the very end —a pharmacy that was dark. May 13 was a Thursday. What was the probability of such a large pharmacy being closed at 6:50 PM on a Thursday?

“All the other shops are lit, but the pharmacy is closed. Pharmacies are closed on Sundays, right?”

As Ji-heon pointed this out, the police nodded as if they had just noticed it.

“…Maybe that pharmacy happened to be closed that day! Or perhaps the staff was just momentarily away!”

Pyo Ji-ae strongly denied this with a look of great panic. Ji-heon was now even more convinced that she was hiding something after witnessing her reaction.

“Can I ask the name of that friend who lives in Yeosu and whose birthday is on May 13?”

Under Ji-heon’s calm pressure, Pyo Ji-ae bit her lower lip, trying to hide it. Sweat was forming on her forehead.

“You just need to answer. Why can’t you say anything?”

“Why are you pressing me like this?”

Finally, she burst into tears.

Ch126 - A Childhood Name

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Pyo Ji-ae. 27 years old. Unemployed.

She had once prepared for employment, but when things didn’t go as planned, she gave up and is now nurturing her dream of becoming a content creator. Until she finds a suitable concept, she plans to work part-time, learn about life, and continue saving money. Yeona was a child she met during her part-time job.

“…She said she was making a video. She had already talked to the parents of the child, and they were going to watch it together. She said they had to see if the child would follow the abductor or resist strongly, so it had to be acted out realistically, not like a game.”

Pyo Ji-ae no longer made excuses and revealed everything about that day.

“I thought it was a good theme since I also dream of being a video creator. It’s content that raises awareness about how well children follow strangers and how trusting they can be. I thought everyone should be alert, so I acted as realistically as possible.”

“But in reality, the child’s parents knew nothing about it. There was chaos after the child went missing in front of the academy. Didn’t you know?”

The police officer asked sharply.

“I did hear a boy calling ‘Lee Yeona!’ loudly while leaving the filming location after parting with the girl. But I thought that was part of the script.”

“Didn’t you think something was strange at all?”

“I didn’t notice anything unusual that day. A few days later, after I lost contact with the director, I started to feel something was off. But since I received the payment in cash, I didn’t raise any issues.”

“Did you meet the director in person?”

“Of course. He was there on the day of the shoot. He stayed far away so as not to be seen by the child, pointing the camera in our direction.”

“Could you give us the director’s contact information?”

“However, as I mentioned, that number is gone…”

Pyo Ji-ae replied uncertainly, showing the contact she had searched for on her phone. The screen displayed “Director” without a name.

“It doesn’t have a name.”

“Yes, I forgot the name. I communicated with him via email and phone.”

The police officer called the number Pyo Ji-ae provided.

[The number you are trying to call does not exist. Please check and call again.]
As Pyo Ji-ae said, the automated message confirmed it was a non-existent number. The police officer said,

“It says the number doesn’t exist. But there should be a record of your calls.”

“I only communicated through messenger…”

“Then we just need to check the messenger records.”

“Actually, I changed my phone in the meantime…”

It was a statement that couldn’t prove anything.

“But I still have the email that the director originally sent me!”

Pyo Ji-ae grabbed her phone again and opened her email. After rummaging through her inbox for a while, she found an email and handed it over.

“This is that person’s email address.”

It was an email sent on May 12.

The sender introduced himself as the representative of a small content production company. He explained the purpose of the video shoot on May 13 and asked if she would be available.

“Who would refuse to earn 200,000 won for just acting realistically for about ten minutes? Plus, the purpose was really good.”

After reading the email carefully twice, the police officer sighed deeply.

To think that someone had manipulated her into believing that the whole situation was just a setup for a kidnapping act…

“By the way, why did you leave in the middle of your job as a Go tournament supervisor today? According to the child and her father, it looked like you ran away after discovering the child.”

“On that day, I had a terrible stomachache. So, I went home. I didn’t even know the child was there.”

Pyo Ji-ae seemed very embarrassed to share such details, her face flushing red.

“Then why did you deny the crime in front of your house?”

“I don’t think it was a crime, but the police seemed to think it was! It’s so unfair!”

“…”

“I really feel wronged. I just acted for a good cause; it wasn’t intentional…”

The police officer also looked troubled by Pyo Ji-ae’s plea.

***

After work, Seung-kyu rushed home upon receiving a call from Jin-seo.

“What’s going on?”

As he opened the front door and hurried into the living room, he was met by Jin-seo, who was lying exhausted on the sofa, and Do-bin and Do-yoon, who were quietly watching TV in front of her.

“Look at the kids.”

Jin-seo replied weakly to her husband’s question. At that moment, Do-yoon got up and waddled over.

“Dad!”

Seung-kyu’s mouth dropped open at the sight of Do-yoon.

Where did his pretty princess with the perfect bangs go?

“What happened to your hair?”

Seeing his only daughter’s chewed-up bangs made him feel as if the sky was falling.

“Oppa cut it for me.”

Do-yoon, still not grasping the situation, smiled innocently as she confessed.

“Park Do-bin, come here!”

Seung-kyu raised his voice. Do-bin, who had been observing from in front of the TV, moved forward cautiously at Seung-kyu’s command.

“Park Do-bin, why did you do that?”

“Do-yoon’s hair looked hot.”

“So you cut it so she wouldn’t be hot?”

“Yeah. Do-yoon liked it.”

“Park Do-yoon, do you like your hair?”

“Yeah!”

The clueless second child answered cheerfully.

Jin-seo, lying against the wall and sounding utterly defeated, said to Seung-kyu,

“Keep listening. What else did he say?”

“What else?”

“He said Do-yoon’s hair was practice.”

Seung-kyu sighed at Jin-seo’s words and turned to Do-bin again.

“So you practiced on Do-yoon’s hair because you want to be a hairstylist?”

“I practiced well so I could cut Ye-na’s bangs too.”

That was the truth. Seung-kyu shouted again.

“Hey!”

“I didn’t do anything!”

Do-bin raised his voice in protest.

“Why are you getting mad when I didn’t even do anything?”

“Either way, you messed up your sister’s hair!”

Seung-kyu could only imagine the horror of Do-bin turning Ye-na’s bangs into a buzz cut. He felt as if Ji-heon might challenge him to a death match

over this. Maybe he should be grateful that it only happened to his sister.

“Just thinking like that is wrong, you got it?”

Seung-kyu sternly lectured Do-bin, ensuring he understood.

“You can’t mess with other people’s hair. Understood? And that includes your own hair!”

Do-bin pouted, sulking, and answered softly,

“Okay.”

After Seung-kyu admonished Do-bin, Jin-seo finally got up from her seat. However, she already looked exhausted.

“Honey, should we take the kids out for dinner?”

Seung-kyu cautiously asked as he followed Jin-seo. She turned around and called out to him.

“Honey.”

“Yeah.”

“When Do-bin was born, you cut the umbilical cord, right?”

Jin-seo’s sudden question made Seung-kyu blink in surprise before he answered blankly.

“Yeah.”

“Think carefully. Is that face really his face back then?”

“…It should be. Why?”

“Think it over. You don’t even know where it might have changed.”

“…”

“Do you have a picture from that time?”

“…There should be one somewhere?”

“Look for it. We need to confirm. He might not even be my son.”

Seung-kyu stared blankly at Jin-seo’s receding figure. The content sounded like a joke, but her expression showed no hint of a smile, leaving him unsure if she was serious or not.

***

While Pyo Ji-ae was being investigated by the police as a suspect, Ji-heon and Jeong-o returned to the office to finish their work. When they returned to the police station after 7 PM, Pyo Ji-ae had already left.

Bae-il, who had returned from being out in the field during the evening, explained the situation to them.

“According to criminal law, it would fall under the crime of abducting a minor. Since the victim acted under the suspect’s inducement, we would consider it a completed crime rather than an attempted one. Although the suspect claims she was acting under duress, it’s likely she will be punished as an accomplice along with the person who induced her.”

“Since the crime of abducting a minor is established, won’t she be detained?”

“She was deemed not to pose a flight risk, so she was sent home.”

“But isn’t there a possibility she might run away? I heard she had already packed her travel bag.”

Jeong-o asked again, citing what he had heard from Ji-heon. Bae-il answered fluidly in response to Jeong-o’s question.

“She claims it’s just a light domestic trip. We have her contact information, and she has promised to cooperate with the investigation, so there’s no need to worry. In cases of similar crimes, when the harm is minimal,

investigations have been conducted without detention, and this case falls into the category of the least harmful among similar crimes.”

In any case, the child was safely back in her parents’ arms, and since she wasn’t injured, it seemed the victim’s side needed to calm down their anger as well.

After hearing Bae-il’s response, Jeong-o looked at Ji-heon. His expression had been poor earlier in the day, and it was still the same now. Jeong-o thought that perhaps Ji-heon was suppressing his rising anger.

“If the suspect’s claims are true, finding the person who induced her to commit the crime is a top priority. I don’t know how we’ll catch them, but… there must be a way. Please trust the police.”

“Okay. I will. Thank you.”

In the end, Jeong-o nodded in response to Bae-il’s explanation.

“Then goodbye.”

Although he looked very businesslike, almost as if he were the same person who had handed over a gift on moving day, his attitude was polite and devoid of any unnecessary embellishments.

Jeong-o bid farewell to Bae-il and left the police station with Ji-heon. Noticing that Ji-heon was moving slower than usual, Jeong-o paused for a moment before matching his pace.

A short while later, as Ji-heon got into the car and prepared to start the engine, he quietly called out to Jeong-o.

“Jeong-o.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you remember the faces of your friends from the second grade of elementary school?”

It was an unexpected question, and Jeong-o tilted his head in confusion.

“There are a few friends I went to middle school with from elementary school. I can picture them well.”

“No. I mean friends you haven’t seen since the second grade of elementary school.”

“I don’t think I have any friends like that. I can’t recall anyone at all.”

Ji-heon nodded silently and started the car. Jeong-o thought his demeanor was strange.

After arriving at the apartment, Ji-heon made an excuse about having work to do and sent Jeong-o home first.

Jeong-o felt frustrated. If he didn’t relieve this pent-up feeling, he felt he would be caught up in absurd thoughts for days.

Although he couldn’t be certain it was a memory from 24 years ago, Officer Kwon Bae-il resembled a friend he had briefly hung out with in the second grade.

And there was the signature on the Go board he had seen as a child…

After contemplating, Ji-heon contacted the counselor to whom he had assigned the investigation into Kim Jin-gu.

[Yes, sir.]
“Could you look into the identity of a police officer? I don’t need anything else, just check if there are any records of name changes. How long will it take?”

[It can take one or two hours at the fastest.]

The counselor readily answered Ji-heon’s request. Ji-heon provided the counselor with Kwon Bae-il’s name and department before hanging up.

Then, after a painfully long hour of waiting, he received a response.

***

Ji-heon headed straight to the Gwangjin Police Station.

Since it was already late at night, he didn't expect Bae-il to be there. He simply thought that if Bae-il was at his post and he could meet him, he wanted to do so today.

However, Ji-heon hesitated in front of the detective division. Was it right to dig up a past the other party might not want to revisit? Would he be causing trouble?

As Ji-heon was contemplating, a police officer emerged through the entrance of the detective division.

"Who are you looking for?"

The officer asked upon seeing Ji-heon.

"Uh, I came to see Officer Kwon Bae-il."

Ji-heon's voice was uncertain, which wasn't typical of him.

"Please wait a moment."

The officer went back inside and called out Bae-il's name loudly. It seemed Bae-il was indeed present.

A short while later, Ji-heon saw Bae-il walking out.

Standing a few steps away from the entrance, Ji-heon noticed Bae-il's eyes widen as he looked outside. Although Bae-il recognized Ji-heon, he moved slowly, as if weighed down by sandbags.

Finally, the door opened.

"Officer."

"Yeah, Mr. Yena. What brings you here…?"

“Do you happen to know someone named Yoo Su-il?”

Ji-heon asked directly, in line with his personality, while Bae-il responded to him in a formal manner.

Bae-il’s pupils flickered as if losing balance at the mention of the name. That reaction gave Ji-heon a sense of certainty. He had already heard Bae-il’s old name long ago, so he no longer needed to confirm it, but he wanted to hear it from a friend.

If his friend said he didn’t know, Ji-heon promised himself he wouldn’t bring up that name again.

A long silence followed. Bae-il’s answer came much later.

“That was my name when I was a kid.”

Ji-heon’s tense expression relaxed with a deep sigh. Tears welled in his eyes as he spoke in a trembling voice.

“Su-il.”

“……”

“Don’t you remember me? The Go talent class at ○○ Elementary School.”

Bae-il didn’t seem to share the emotional turmoil that Ji-heon was experiencing. However, on the other hand, it felt as if more thoughts and considerations were flowing somewhere in his mind.

After another long pause, Bae-il finally responded.

“I remember.”

“……”

“Hey, Ji-heon. It’s been a while.”

His answer was very dry, but Ji-heon could see a faint smile on Bae-il’s face.

Ch127 - 127. Name

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Ji-heon followed Bae-il outside. The two sat on the stairs behind the police station building.

He was suddenly reminded of childhood memories over something trivial. Sitting without chairs, sitting on the dirt ground without worrying about getting dirty, he thought that as long as he could play with friends, he could stay up all night.

In fact, while the memories of those fun times were vivid, he hadn’t known a thing about what had happened to his friends after they drifted apart.

They occasionally ran into each other in the long hallway filled with classrooms, but at some point, even those awkward encounters disappeared. He had heard the news that his friend transferred to another school only much later.

How have you been? Why did your name change? How did you become a police officer?

There were many things he was curious about, but Ji-heon couldn’t bring himself to ask. Sensing this, Bae-il spoke first.

“My mother passed away in the third grade, and I went to live with my aunt and uncle.”

“But your name changed, too.”

“It’s because of the naming tradition in my uncle’s family. My uncle’s generation has the character ‘Su’ in their names, so I couldn’t use that

name.”

“……”

“It’s just that my mother left me, but my life changed so much.”

Ji-heon couldn’t say anything. He felt he couldn’t even begin to fathom the magnitude of that sadness and loss.

“I’ve gotten used to this name now. It feels like the name I used to have was just a fleeting dream.”

Bae-il spoke in a flat tone, as if he were talking about someone he had only known briefly a long time ago. Although his voice didn’t carry much emotion, there was a lonely breeze in the emptiness of his words, like a vacant house.

She must have passed away a long time ago.

“How are you doing now?”

“Just as you see. I’m a police officer and I live alone.”

“I never expected you to become a police officer.”

“So you thought I’d become a professional Go player instead?”

Bae-il smiled softly as he replied. The joking question felt heavy like the call of a bird.

“You got married this time, right? Congratulations. And congratulations on having a competent daughter like Yena.”

“I had amnesia.”

Ji-heon opened up to his long-lost friend, bringing up a topic he hadn’t been asked about. Perhaps he didn’t want to give the impression of being a heartless father to Bae-il, who might have known Jeong-oh separately.

“It’s not that I deliberately didn’t look for Jeong-oh; I lost all my memories.”

“Have your memories all come back now?”

“No. I just traced my past and found Jeong-oh and Yena. I’m still trying to recover my memories.”

After a moment of silence, Bae-il nodded and then asked,

“What was it like to lose your memory?”

“It felt empty. I think life was boring for seven years.”

“……”

“The strange thing is that while I lost the memories from seven years ago, my memories from childhood come back more vividly.”

“……”

“I guess I wanted to meet you. I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Ji-heon’s serious voice made Bae-il’s eyes widen. Bae-il looked at Ji-heon with an expression of surprise, as if he had transformed back into the child he once was.

For Ji-heon, it was a painful realization. It seemed his friend clearly remembered the wounds inflicted in their relationship.

“If I hurt you in any way, I’m sorry.”

“…You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’ll apologize on behalf of your mother for the pain she caused you.”

Eventually, Bae-il lowered his head, unable to look at Ji-heon. Perhaps it meant that hearing an apology now was meaningless, but he couldn’t be sure.

Ji-heon decided to set aside the heavy topic and change the subject.

“When do you have time? I’ll invite you over to my house. I want to introduce you to Jeong-oh and Yena…”

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

“…”

“I’ll be leaving soon. I applied for a transfer to a regional station.”

“When are you leaving?”

“As early as next week. The date hasn’t been set yet.”

“…”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to follow through with the Yena case until the end. I’m sorry.”

Ji-heon desperately wanted to maintain their connection and made the offer, but Bae-il politely declined.

“Still, thank you for looking into it.”

Ji-heon felt a lump in his throat at his friend’s composed smile.

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While waiting for her husband, who said he had work and didn’t return, Jeong-oh was lost in thought.

On the day Yena went missing, Jeong-oh discovered a note in Yena’s daycare bag. The note, adorned with the stylish logo of a group that seemed to be hastily drawn, contained a significant message:

– Looks like mom, acts like dad. A child who resembles both.

Today, Jeong-oh handed over the original note to Bae-il. Some might think it was a prank, but for a child's mother, it was something that couldn't be overlooked. If what the woman, Pyo Ji-ae, said was true, then that director had to be the culprit.

But could her words really be true? Were they not all fabricated?

Regardless, one could assume that someone knew about Jeong-oh and Ji-heon's relationship from the beginning.

'It can't be Ji-heon's mother, nor can it be Chae Eun-bi… What about Chae Eun-yeob?'

After a moment, Jeong-oh shook her head. If Chae Eun-yeob were the culprit, she likely wouldn't have just threatened them and left. Chae Eun-yeob would have done something more sinister.

Could there possibly be a third party involved?

'Come to think of it, I've never seen Ji-heon's brother.'

Jeong Ji-heon's half-brother, Jeong Ji-tae, the CEO of Seoyeon Foods. A talent set to take over the Seoyeon Group from their father, Jeong Jae-gwang. Unlike Ji-heon, he was someone who lived solely for work…

As half-brothers, there might be some conflict between them. If he knew that Ji-heon had a child, he might have wanted to keep them in check.

'No, our family isn't that influential.'

When Jeong-oh shook her head again, Yena, pouting her lips like a duck, approached her.

"Mom, I'm sulking."

"Why?"

"Dad hasn't come back."

“Are you sulking about Dad?”

“Yeah. I think Dad forgot that I was waiting.”

Yena puffed her shoulders up in a sulky manner. Today had been overwhelming for her, and she hadn’t had a chance to catch up with her lifelong Go friend, Dad.

Still, she thought Dad must be busy, so she waited quietly, but as it approached 10 PM, her anger bubbled over.

Understanding Yena’s feelings, Jeong-oh hugged her and comforted her.

“Right? Why hasn’t Dad come yet?”

At that moment, the sound of the front door opening could be heard. Comforted in her mother’s arms, Yena quickly pushed away and dashed toward the entrance. Her sulky face remained unchanged as she intended to confront Dad about being late.

“Dad, you’re bad…!”

“Yena, what’s this?”

However, seeing the bag in Dad’s hand, Yena immediately changed her expression. The sound of ice snacks rattling in the bag made her eyes sparkle.

“Thank you, Dad!”

Yena quickly snatched the bag from Ji-heon’s hand. By the time Jeong-oh hurried to the entrance, Yena had already torn open the packaging of the ice snacks.

Jeong-oh shot Ji-heon a disapproving glance.

“What’s with bringing ice cream at this hour?”

“It’s just ice, just ice.”

Yena chimed in with Ji-heon.

“Right! Just ice! Ice that tastes like fruit!”

The sight of Yena with her cheeks stuffed full of ice, making slurping sounds, was indeed cute.

“But don’t buy too many at once. She eats them all in one sitting. If she can’t eat them today, she’ll wake up early tomorrow and eat them all secretly.”

“Got it.”

Ji-heon replied to Jeong-oh’s scolding. He couldn’t argue back for long. His expression had brightened considerably since he left the police station. Before Jeong-oh could ask what had happened during that time, Ji-heon spoke up.

“Jeong-oh.”

“Yeah?”

“I met a friend from 24 years ago.”

“Is that what you were talking about earlier? The friend from second grade?”

Jeong-oh asked enthusiastically, as if it were her own matter.

“Who is it? Did you meet them at the tournament? Are they a supervisor? Or a police officer?”

“They were a friend I thought would become a Go player, but they became a police officer.”

“Did you meet them at the police station today?”

“It’s Officer Kwon Bae-il.”

His voice, which had risen in excitement, suddenly fell.

“…What?”

“Officer Kwon Bae-il was my friend.”

“But you didn’t recognize him at first. Did you remember later?”

“His name changed. He used to be called Yoo Su-il.”

Yoo Su-il. It was a name Jeong-oh had heard from Ji-heon before. A friend from Ji-heon’s Go genius class when they were in second grade. A bright friend whom his mother had separated him from, preventing them from hanging out.

The description of Yoo Su-il that Ji-heon had given back then was so different from the current appearance of Kwon Bae-il that Jeong-oh was just as surprised.

“If his name changed…”

“He said his mother passed away, and he went to live with his aunt, so he had to change his name.”

As life changed, so did his name. How painful must those times have been?

“What was his expression like?”

“He seemed indifferent.”

“…How do you feel about it?”

“It was just… strange.”

Ji-heon also wore a blank expression as he conveyed how he felt at that moment. However, Jeong-oh could sense the emptiness at the end of his words. The feeling of joy in meeting someone precious overshadowed by sorrow. It was a feeling Jeong-oh knew well.

“I realized again. Even if you regain something precious, you can’t go back to the way things were.”

“…”

“You can only do your best to live in the present.”

Jeong-oh quietly nodded at Ji-heon’s words. Meanwhile, Yena, who had been away, returned. With one hand holding a container of ice snacks, she suddenly hugged her dad around the waist and said while tapping the floor with her other hand,

“Dad, sit here.”

Ji-heon sat down as instructed. He was now at eye level with standing Yena. She leaned in close to his ear and said,

“I’m going to give you some ASMR.”

Yena stuffed her mouth full of ice and started crunching it right next to Ji-heon’s ear. It was a sound she only shared with someone she liked. Ji-heon found it hard to contain his laughter and ended up covering his face with one hand, letting out a puff of air.

“Okay, Yena, enough playing. You need to brush your teeth and go to bed.”

“Okay.”

After making Dad laugh for a while, Yena quickly finished off her ice snacks and headed to the bathroom, responding to Jeong-oh’s reminder.

It was late at night, so Yena fell asleep quickly.

After putting Yena to bed, Ji-heon unexpectedly started hopping on one foot and tilting his head. Jeong-oh burst out laughing at Ji-heon’s silly behavior and asked,

“What’s that? What’s wrong?”

“When Yena was giving me ASMR earlier, ice got in my ear.”

Jeong-oh’s expression, which had been laughing without understanding, suddenly stiffened.

“It sounds like it hasn’t come out yet.”

“You should have told me right away if ice got in your ear!”

“I thought that was how it worked.”

Ah, this fool.

Ji-heon wasn’t just a dad who dotes on his daughter; he was simply a big fool. No one had told him that he should stay still even if ice gets in his ear, but Ji-heon seemed to be trying so hard to live life to the fullest, thinking that he couldn’t do any better.

“If the ice melted, it should have become a bit sticky. Is it okay?”

“Yeah. It didn’t go in too deep. It should come out when I wash up.”

Ji-heon replied lightly to Jeong-oh’s late concern and headed to the bathroom.

While Ji-heon was washing up, his phone, which he had left on the dining table, rang. He let the first call go, but when the phone rang again, Jeong-oh rushed to the phone. The screen displayed the name ‘Father.’

I can answer for him, right?

Feeling pleased, Jeong-oh picked up the call.

“Yes, Father.”

[It’s our daughter-in-law.]
“Yes. Ji-heon is in the bathroom right now. How have you been?”

[Yeah, yeah.]
Hearing her cheerful tone made his voice brighten on the other end as well.

“I’ll let Ji-heon know to call you as soon as he comes out.”

[No, no. Your daughter-in-law can tell Ji-heon.]
“Yes, Father. Then I’ll pass it on. What’s going on?”

[I was thinking it might be nice if you all come over this Sunday if you’re free.]
He was inviting Ji-heon’s family to his home. Before Jeong-oh could respond, Ji-heon approached quickly. As soon as he heard “Father,” he rushed over. Ji-heon took the phone from Jeong-oh.

“Father, what’s going on?”

[Yeah. Ji-heon, how about you bring your family over on Sunday?]
Ji-kwang’s suggestion made Ji-heon glance at Jeong-oh’s face. Sunday was just two days away. It was such a sudden invitation that it might be inconvenient for Jeong-oh.

Seeing Ji-heon hesitate to answer, Ji-kwang added one more thing.

[Your brother is also coming to see you.]
“Brother?”

Ch128 - Sweet Taste of Taffy

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The next morning,

Ham Dae-geun woke up alone on a strange bed.
“Where is this…?”

He blinked and looked around. The presence of furnishings suggested it wasn’t a hotel, nor was it the house of a sponsoring partner. He could hear water running from the bathroom.

“I did propose and drink last night…”

Yesterday, Dae-geun had proposed to Eun-bi. Not wanting a meaningless relationship, he had presented the ring early. At first, Eun-bi seemed surprised and hesitated, but she gratefully accepted the ring right there.

Marrying Eun-bi was beneficial for Dae-geun in many ways. He was very pleased not only with Eun-bi’s appearance and age but also with her family background.

Compared to his own impoverished family, which might be one percent of Eun-bi’s wealth, she had everything he lacked.

Everyone in Eun-bi’s family were legal professionals, and her future father-in-law, Chae Seo-bok, was a remarkable figure, even mentioned as a potential chief justice. Marrying into such a family would be a great honor.

Feeling good after receiving Eun-bi’s consent, Dae-geun seemed to have drunk a lot. Still, he usually didn’t drink to the point of blacking out.

As he tilted his head, reaching for his neatly folded clothes on the bedside table, the bathroom door opened, and Eun-bi emerged.

“Are you awake? You must not feel well. Here, drink some honey water.”

Eun-bi approached him with a cup of honey water placed on the table. As Dae-geun took the honey water and drank it, he awkwardly asked, “Eun-bi, why am I here…?”

“Well, since we’re getting married, I thought I should let you see how the bride lives. You barged in without warning.”

Dae-geun groaned in embarrassment at Eun-bi’s playful response and covered his forehead with his hand. The fact that he couldn’t remember anything was killing him.

“I’m sorry. Thank you.”

“What for? Hurry and wash up, and have breakfast. You said you had a busy day today.”

“But Eun-bi, I can’t remember what happened yesterday, so can we just…”

“Ah, wait a moment. I just got a call from a friend. Let me take this call.”

Eun-bi skillfully evaded Dae-geun’s request.

Everything had gone according to plan.

She had received a proposal from Ham Dae-geun and successfully brought him home, intoxicated and unaware. Dae-geun believed he had spent the night with Eun-bi, so now she just needed to wait patiently for time to pass.

With the blessings of everyone, she would marry and have a healthy child. She could make an excuse for a childbirth abroad and leave for the U.S. right after the wedding. Then she could escape from this man and live comfortably.

The thought of survival ignited a fire in her determination.

It was strange. Once she decided to have a child, an unknown strength emerged within her.

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Seung-kyu had spent the night rummaging through his photo folder to find pictures to show Jin-seo.

“This is the photo of Dabin getting his umbilical cord cut, and this is the picture right after his first bath.”

The computer monitor displayed a photo of a red-faced potato crying and another of a clean red-faced potato with a blank expression.

“They both just look like monkeys.”

Seung-kyu was about to respond, saying he could see some resemblance to them, when Jin-seo asked a surprising question.

“Look. Don’t you think they look a bit different? What if the babies got switched?”

Jin-seo was suggesting that the photos of Dabin before and after the bath looked different. His expression was quite serious.

“Think about it. They might have been switched at the hospital. This hospital is really big.”

“…….”

“Were you as mischievous as Dabin when you were little? Did you cut your little brother’s hair or sprinkle powdered medicine on sculptures?”

“No. I didn’t do that. I was really well-behaved.”

“Right! I didn’t do that either! When my parents told me not to do something, I stopped right away. My mom said I grew up without causing trouble.”

Yeo-kyung, with his crew cut, was seen laughing happily from a distance. Normally, Seung-kyu would have laughed along without understanding, but now he felt a sigh escape him. No, it felt more like tears were about to flow.

As he lamented the time that could not be reversed, Jin-seo clicked the mouse. Pictures of Dabin as a newborn flashed by. There was a certain cuteness that was distinctly different from now.

“Wow… there are so many pictures.”

Being the first child, everything was fascinating. He always aimed the camera at the baby and wanted to capture every moment.

As Jin-seo absentmindedly scanned through the photos, reminiscing about memories from a few years ago, his hand paused for a moment. He quickly called Seung-kyu.

“Hey, look at this.”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

Seung-kyu approached while massaging Dabin’s little bangs and chanting “Grow, hair, grow” like a spell.

“Check this out.”

“A photo of your mother’s shop? Why is this important?”

On the monitor was a picture of Jin-seo’s mother holding Dabin, who had just passed the hundred-day mark. It was from when Jin-seo’s parents ran a flower shop called ‘Jinseok Flower Shop’ in the Hwayang-dong market.

“Look outside the shop.”

“Oh!”

As Seung-kyu took a closer look, he gasped. He could see Jeong-o walking with a baby carrier. The child in her arms was probably Yena.

Since Jin-seo’s flower shop and the restaurant Guksun Baekban were close together, Jeong-o must have walked that path frequently.

“Dad, what? What are you looking at?”

Curiosity piqued, Dabin ran over to see Seung-kyu and Jin-seo’s reactions. Seung-kyu picked him up and pointed to Yena on the monitor screen, asking,
“Dabin, do you know who this is?”

“I don’t know. Who is it?”

“It’s Yena.”

“Wow!”

Dabin stared for a long time at the small child peeking out of Jeong-o’s arms.

“Yena was cute even as a baby!”

If one were to fall in love, it would be like Park Dabin.

Even if Yena appeared with a crew cut, she would still look beautiful in Dabin’s eyes.

At Dabin’s sigh, Seung-kyu and Jin-seo couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Mom, let’s look for Yena again!”

“Okay. Let’s find her.”

Today, they could spend the entire day playing the game of finding Yena in old photos, so Jin-seo willingly yielded his spot to his son. Just then, the photo changed.

“Uh-oh?”

As Jin-seo was about to leave the computer, he leaned back toward the monitor screen.

It was another photo of Jin-seo's mother holding Dabin, but the scene outside the shop had changed. In the place where Jeong-o with the baby carrier had been, another familiar face appeared.

Although he wasn't in a police uniform, the tall man with a fair complexion was easily recognizable—it was Officer Kwon Bae-il. He was also walking in the direction where Jeong-o had gone.

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It had been a while since Guk-soon went shopping with Jeong-o.

Tomorrow at lunch, their daughter had been invited to Jaegwang's house. Since Ji-hun's half-brother, Jeong Ji-tae, would also be there, Guk-soon was a bit concerned. She wanted her daughter to wear pretty clothes.

As Guk-soon held up a neat blouse to see how it looked on Jeong-o, her gaze was serious and sharp. Watching her mother, Jeong-o pouted and said,

"You should go too. It would be nice if you went together."

"What would I do there without your mother-in-law?"

From what she heard, it seemed that Jang Young-mi had gone on a trip. It was unclear whether Jaegwang had invited the children while Young-mi was away or if Young-mi had left because Jaegwang invited them.

In truth, there wasn't much to worry about, whether Young-mi was there or not. With the wise son-in-law Ji-hun, there wouldn't be any big issues. Even if problems arose, Guk-soon believed that Ji-hun would handle everything. Before she knew it, Guk-soon felt reassured by her son-in-law.

"He raised his son very well."

Her infinite fondness for Ji-hun transferred to praise for his mother-in-law.

“Just that alone makes me grateful to your mother-in-law.”

“Mom.”

Knowing well what kind of person Jang Young-mi was, Jeong-o couldn’t agree with Guk-soon’s assessment. However, she respected her mother’s character, which tried to see the good in people.

Will I ever have the compassion to forgive and embrace someone I once resented, just like my mother?

“If I weren’t your daughter, I would have resented and hated Ji-hun’s mother even more than I do now.”

The bond between a mother and daughter is destined. A mother has the greatest influence on her daughter’s life. When a mother leads the way, her daughter believes that path is the right one.

“I can never have the same feelings as you, Mom, but I hope to be someone like a mother to Yena.”

Jeong-o sighed and smiled.

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And soon, the next day arrived.

Yena, wearing a white dress, and Jeong-o, in a beige blouse, looked remarkably alike. Guk-soon adjusted Jeong-o’s outfit and didn’t forget to give her some advice.

“Don’t be nervous, don’t get an upset stomach, and eat well.”

“Okay. I’ll be back.”

Jeong-o greeted Guk-soon and left the house with Ji-hun and Yena.

After a while on the road, Ji-hun remained silent. While teaching Yena how to greet and singing along, Jeong-o turned to Ji-hun and teasingly asked,

“Are you nervous right now?”

“No.”

“You seem nervous.”

“…….”

“You said you’re meeting your brother after a year? Is it uncomfortable?”

“No, it’s not that.”

Despite denying it, Ji-hun’s expression remained tense.

However, after a moment, he opened his mouth again.

“Our family doesn’t have the harmony you might think. Especially with your brother coming, it’s obvious the conversation at the dinner table will be all about work.”

“…….”

“So I hope you won’t let anything upset you too much.”

In some ways, it was true that he was nervous. He felt ashamed of his family’s lack of warmth.

Hoping that today would go well, Ji-hun quietly drove the car.

As they passed through the large gate and approached the building, Yena’s mouth fell open as she looked outside through the window. A fountain she had only seen in parks was inside the house! And it wasn’t even an apartment, but there was a garden!

“Did Dad live here?”

“Yeah.”

“Until what age?”

“Nineteen.”

“Wow!”

“Do you like it? Is the house nice?”

“Yeah! It’s like a palace.”

With Yena’s exclamation, the car stopped in front of the two-story house, which looked like a palace. Jaegwang was waiting outside to greet them.

“Come on in!”

Jaegwang couldn’t hide his delighted expression. It was the first time Ji-hun realized his father could show such a face.

“Yena!”

Jaegwang was the first to call Yena’s name, and Yena responded firmly with a greeting.

“Hello, Grandpa. I’m Jeong Yena.”

“Right! I’m your grandpa, Jeong Jaegwang!”

Just like the last time they met, Jaegwang bent down and made eye contact with Yena as he spoke to her. After Jaegwang stood up, Jeong-o greeted him as well.

“Hello, Father.”

“Ah, welcome! Let’s go inside quickly.”

Ji-hun, who had opened his mouth to greet as well, hesitated and missed his chance. Jeong-o noticed this and smiled slightly.

The four of them entered the house and walked through the long hallway to the dining room. Although Ji-hun had told her some things beforehand, it was still a house of an unexpected scale that surprised Jeong-o.

‘If I had known about Jeong Ji-hun, I wouldn’t have started dating him. I probably would have thought he was from a completely different world.’

Suddenly, it felt strange that he was right next to her. The tension made her shoulders stiffen. As various thoughts raced through her mind, their footsteps reached the dining room.

Once they were seated, the staff poured them water. It felt awkward to be having a meal inside a house that resembled a restaurant.

“What about your brother?”

“He should be on his way. Why don’t you call him?”

“If he should be on his way, he’ll come.”

While Ji-hun and Jaegwang exchanged conversations, Yena spoke to Jeong-o.

“Mom, the water tastes interesting.”

“…….”

“The water tastes like honey!”

Jeong-o was so focused on the conversation between Ji-hun and Jaegwang that she didn’t catch Yena’s words. Yena raised her voice.

“Mom! The water tastes like honey!”

Jeong-o was startled by that voice.

“Yena.”

Jeong-o gave her a serious look, and Yena pouted in displeasure, while Jaegwang belatedly understood and laughed heartily.

“Yeah, that’s right! The barley tea does taste like honey.”

Jaegwang’s face, which had been expressionless during his conversation with Ji-hun, brightened instantly.

“Barley is one of the ingredients for honey. Honey is made from malt, and malt comes from barley.”

Jaegwang explained the truth about the taste of the water to Yena clearly.

“I heard you’re very smart, and you have a refined palate too! You really are the granddaughter of Jeong Jaegwang, the gourmet!”

It seemed Jaegwang would assign significance to even Yena’s trivial wordplay, laughing heartily as he did.

Ch129 - Brother's Memory

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The modern Seoyeon Group, which Jaegwang dedicated his youth to building, is a company that grew through its snack business.

While Jaegwang no longer develops products directly, in his younger days, he traveled tirelessly across the country and abroad to study and research flavors. The numerous snacks he created continue to be loved as global bestsellers.

When it comes to the food business, Seoyeon Group is the unbreakable rule that has persisted for decades, and Jaegwang takes great pride in that. He cherishes and values talented individuals with sensitive palates.

Thanks to Jaegwang’s laughter, Jeong-o felt her tension ease a bit. Yena also beamed with happiness as Jaegwang listened to her and even praised her.

“Does our Yena like candy?”

Jaegwang tilted his head and asked Yena. After briefly glancing at her mother, who limited her candy intake, Yena replied.

“Yes.”

“Good. Then after we finish eating, let’s make some candy together with Grandpa.”

It seemed a candy-making kit had come out as a new product at the company.

Yena’s eyes sparkled. The fact that she could not only eat candy but also make it with her grandpa excited her. Knowing that it would be candy made with her grandfather, her mother wouldn’t be able to stop her. Thanks to that, Yena happily chewed and swallowed her vegetable side dishes.

“Is the food to your liking, daughter-in-law?”

“Yes, it’s very delicious.”

“Good. Eat a lot.”

Jaegwang shot heart-shaped looks toward Yena but felt awkward with Jeong-o.

He felt grateful for his daughter-in-law, who raised the child well, but the guilt of not resolving conflicts with his own wife loomed larger. As a result, mealtime was subtly awkward and quiet.

In the midst of this, someone entered the dining room.

“Father.”

It was Jeong Ji-tae, Ji-hun’s half-brother.

Jeong-o, who had just taken a bite of her food, was startled, swallowed hard, and turned her head. There was a tall and handsome man standing close by, just as handsome as Ji-hun.

He looked completely different from the face she had seen in news articles. It was hard to believe someone could look so different in photos.

“Ah, you’re finally here? I was wondering if you’d come after finishing your meal.”

While Jaegwang answered gruffly, Jeong-o wiped her mouth and stood up.

Seeing her awkward reaction, Ji-hun, who had been observing, pulled Jeong-o’s hand gently to sit her back down. Knowing his wife had a fondness for handsome men, he was concerned about her reaction.

Ji-tae, on the other hand, seemed completely unfazed by Ji-hun's attitude and greeted Jeong-o flatly.

"Hello. I'm Jeong Ji-tae."

"Yes. I'm Lee Jeong-o."

Without any additional introductions like "This is my brother" or "This is Ji-hun's wife," a simple greeting was exchanged. Jeong-o felt tense again, and Ji-tae turned his head toward her.

"So, you must be Yena."

"Hello."

With a response that was hard to describe as a smile—either unchanged or slightly upturned—Ji-tae looked at the child and then took a seat next to Jaegwang. He greeted Ji-hun afterward.

"It's been a while."

"Yeah."

Ji-hun responded very briefly to Ji-tae's greeting. Jeong-o, sitting next to him, widened her eyes.

Is that it? It's been a year since they last met.

These two didn't greet each other like people who hadn't seen each other in a year; their greeting was as bland as if they had seen each other yesterday. Even though Jeong-o had already heard about it from Ji-hun, it was still a shock.

It seemed Ji-tae didn't come to visit his brother Ji-hun and his family.

As expected, once seated, Ji-tae brought up a topic unrelated to the meal.

"Have you heard the news? The Chief Justice will be retiring tomorrow."

“Is that so? I’ve heard indirectly that he’s not in good health.”

“They say the Blue House will nominate the next Chief Justice directly. Judge Chae Seo-bok is the frontrunner.”

Judge Chae Seo-bok, father of Chae Eun-bi and Chae Eun-yeop. This topic was not entirely irrelevant to Ji-hun, but it was inappropriate for a mealtime conversation, causing both Ji-hun and Jeong-o to stop eating simultaneously.

“Do we really have to talk about that during mealtime?”

Jaegwang was the first to speak up.

“Then what should we talk about?”

As if he were the moderator of the gathering, Ji-tae asked Jaegwang. Jeong-o thought to herself that this family really lacked conversation skills and kept her head down, discreetly observing the atmosphere when Ji-tae’s monotone voice broke the silence again.

“I’m getting married.”

Jeong-o’s head shot up.

This wasn’t a comment from Ji-hun but rather from Ji-tae.

Ji-hun also stared at Ji-tae with wide eyes. Jaegwang looked surprised as well.

“Why you?”

“Can’t I? He did.”

Ji-tae pointed at Ji-hun with a nod.

“Is there someone?”

“Can I do it alone?”

“Who is it?”

“I’ll let you know soon. Today, I’m not the main character.”

While saying he wasn’t the main character, he was acting like one!

Flames flickered in Ji-hun’s eyes.

Jaegwang, glancing at Yena, quietly asked, “You’re not… expecting a child, are you?”

“That might happen eventually.”

Jeong-o couldn’t hold back her laughter and quickly stifled it.

These people might have lived without conversation all this time due to their clumsy expressions. Perhaps they didn’t know how to connect with each other.

All three looked so alike that it seemed no one could be blamed. Their inadequate appearances, despite looking perfect on the outside, eased Jeong-o’s tension.

Amidst this awkwardness, only Yena remained focused on her meal. With a clear goal in mind, Yena finished her bowl faster than usual.

“Grandpa, I’m done eating. When are we making candy?”

“Yena.”

While the others were still eating, Jeong-o tried to caution her, but Jaegwang welcomed Yena’s impatience.

“Right! That’s why our Yena ate so quickly! So shall we go make some candy?”

Jaegwang stood up from the table without finishing his meal. Eventually, everyone else followed suit.

He led Yena to a room next to the kitchen. Jeong-o had thought it would be a simple new candy kit, but it was much larger than expected.

In what Ji-hun knew as his father's workshop, there was a large metal worktable and colorful lumps of dough. They weren't lumps of flour but rather lumps of candy dough. They were planning to make candy from scratch.

"When did you prepare all of this…?"

Ji-hun asked, visibly surprised. Ji-tae, standing next to him, was just as astonished. His father, who had never cooked even a simple ramen for him as a child, was now going to make candy for his granddaughter.

"Grandpa practiced all night to make it for our Yena!"

Jaegwang said, stretching the dough and blowing air into it. He was fully prepared to impress his granddaughter.

His hands moved skillfully over the metal surface, and indeed, after practicing all night, he shaped the dough into letters that spelled "Jeong Yena," accompanied by a heart.

"Now, this big lump is going to be turned into little candies the size of Yena's fingers. Come on, Yena, give it a roll!"

Jaegwang said as he rolled the candy dough like a rice cake. Yena's eyes sparkled as she approached and stood beside him.

Yena's tiny hands and Jaegwang's rough hands moved rhythmically together. The thickness of the candy dough gradually changed from that of a rice cake to that of a thicker tteokbokki cake. Whenever Yena's hands made the dough uneven, Jaegwang quickly corrected it.

Soon, a long strand of candy was created. Jaegwang quickly cut the cooled candy strand with a cutter. Ji-hun's mouth fell open just like Yena's.

His father was not that kind of person; his father wasn't like that…

He wasn’t someone who would play freely with children and gift them like Santa Claus.

The change was surprising, but it wasn’t unwelcome. Just as Ji-hun had introduced his daughter to Jaegwang, Yena was like a princess saving the world. Ji-hun understood the desire to give anything to a child when he looked at her face.

“Here. Look. This is a one-of-a-kind candy made just for Jeong Yena.”

The candy Jaegwang handed over had “Jeong Yena” beautifully imprinted on its cross-section. The heart next to it was adorable.

“Wow!”

Yena couldn’t hide her joy. The name, still unfamiliar, now seemed only sweet. Jaegwang filled a container with candies and presented it to Yena. She bounced in place with excitement. From behind, Ji-hun and Jeong-o smiled contentedly.

“They say our Yena is also good at Go. How about playing a game with Grandpa?”

“Yes!”

After finishing the candy-making, they quickly moved on. Jaegwang had many things he wanted to do. He also wanted to see just how well the child could play Go.

Holding Yena’s hand, Jaegwang led her away while Jeong-o followed behind.

Ji-hun noticed that Ji-tae didn’t immediately move but stayed at the worktable, gathering the leftover candy into an empty container. This too was a strange sight. As Ji-hun watched, Ji-tae looked back at him, as if to ask if he had done something he shouldn’t have.

“I’ll take some. Is that okay?”

“What are you planning to do with a candy that has my daughter’s name on it?”

“There’s someone who likes candy.”

Ji-hun’s expression brightened immediately. He understood right away. His brother was in love. It seemed he wanted to give it to the person he was planning to marry.

So that’s how someone in love can look so different. Ji-hun couldn’t help but smile at this realization.

“I should be going now.”

Ji-tae said as he moved to the living room with Ji-hun.

“So soon?”

“I have work. Besides, I’m not really into Go.”

Ah.

Ji-hun remembered something from a long time ago, over twenty years back.

Ji-hun and Ji-tae had learned Go around the same time. Ji-hun had started playing at a younger age compared to Ji-tae.

Not being tied down by other studies, Ji-hun had immersed himself in the world of Go more quickly and had even reached a point where he could give advice while Ji-tae and Jaegwang played.

He still vividly remembered the words Ji-tae had said with a stiff face after losing badly in a match:

“You should have just watched; why did you interfere?”

Was that remark hurtful? During that time, Ji-hun realized that Ji-tae’s mother was different from his own, and they gradually drifted apart. By the

time Ji-tae became a middle schooler, they were barely speaking to each other.

“Do you remember? You once said something to me when I was giving you advice.”

“Of course. I remember.”

Ji-hun had thought he would have forgotten, but his brother had indeed remembered.

Ch130 - Discrimination and Resentment

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Ji-tae continued quietly.

“There was a time when I really relied on my stepmother after our mother passed away. She was my father’s secretary and came to this house often.”

“…….”

“When my father remarried after my stepmother got pregnant, I was actually happy to think I was getting a new mom. I only realized when I entered elementary school that my stepmother could never be my biological mother.”

Ji-hun listened silently to Ji-tae’s story. It was the first time his brother had spoken to him at such length.

“I didn’t even know what discrimination was until then.”

“…….”

“After that, I probably envied you all the time.”

It was the first time Ji-hun had heard his brother’s true feelings. Ji-tae, like Ji-hun, had lived without being able to fix the door of his heart, which had long been rusted shut on its hinges.

“I’m sorry. You must have had your own struggles.”

Ji-tae's demeanor was solemn, as if he had heard about Ji-hun's estrangement from their mother.

"……I didn't know you felt that way."

"It's okay now. It doesn't matter."

Ji-tae, saying it was okay, seemed to feel a bit relieved.

"Anyway, congratulations on your marriage. It's a bit late, but congratulations on having a daughter."

Ji-tae's understated words of congratulations were directed at Ji-hun, and he also greeted Jaegwang, Jeong-o, and Ye-na before leaving right away.

Perhaps Ji-tae had come to visit and clear away old grudges in honor of his brother's new beginning. Thanks to Ji-tae, Ji-hun felt his heart lighten.

Even after Ji-tae left, the Go games between Jaegwang and Ye-na continued. Ye-na won both games, and Jaegwang laughed heartily despite losing.

There was no sign of the stern father who used to chastise Ji-hun for revealing his feelings while playing Go. The shoulders of the father, which had seemed so large in Ji-hun's childhood, now appeared smaller than his own.

The gift-giving continued. Jaegwang presented Ye-na with a set of colored pencils he had bought on a recent business trip abroad. Upon receiving the gift, Ye-na jumped up and down with excitement and started drawing with the pencils.

On the paper, a character with a large head and thin body and limbs, resembling a two-thirds figure, was sketched. It looked like a cute anthropomorphized frog. Ye-na brought her carefully drawn picture to Jaegwang.

"Grandpa, this is a gift."

“What is it?”

“It’s you, Grandpa.”

Oh my God.

Jeong-o immediately wanted to jump in and fix the drawing for Jaegwang and Ye-na, feeling that at least the frog grandfather should be wearing proper pants.

“Picasso must have been here!”

However, contrary to Jeong-o’s concerns, Jaegwang seemed to really like the drawing.

“Our granddaughter is going to be an artist!”

Jaegwang admired the drawing as if he were witnessing the reincarnation of Picasso. Now, that artwork was destined to be prominently displayed in the center of his office, surrounded by a gold-framed picture with the name of his company, Seoryun Group, emblazoned on it.

After making candy, playing Go with Grandpa, drawing with the colored pencils gifted by him, and exploring the house and garden while running around, it was now late afternoon.

Since he had told Guksun he would return before dinner, it was time to leave.

Jaegwang came to see them off. Having kept his eyes on Ye-na for half the day, he briefly turned his attention to his son and matched his pace with him.

“Did you know? Our lives are quite similar. There were days when I thought about teaching you how to ride a bicycle or giving you a piggyback ride, but I kept putting it off, saying I was busy and didn’t have time, and eventually lost all those opportunities,” he said.

“…….”

“Fathers always have regrets. Children never wait for you.”

Ji-hun silently nodded at his father’s words.

In some ways, he felt a strong resentment towards his father, yet in other ways, he understood his father’s life. He wondered if perhaps this was why grandfathers loved their grandchildren—wanting to compensate for all the things they couldn’t do for their own children back in the day.

Even though they lived close enough to see each other anytime, there was a bittersweet feeling about parting. Jaegwang waved goodbye to Ye-na with eyes full of hearts.

“Ye-na, come visit again. I’ll make plenty of candy for you, so come often, okay?”

“Okay!”

“If you eat a lot of candy, your teeth will rot.”

Ji-hun interjected jokingly.

“It’s fine if it’s from Grandpa. Ye-na, you know Grandpa’s phone number, right? Call often, okay?”

“Okay!”

“Thank you for coming with our new daughter.”

“Thank you for inviting me.”

Everyone greeted Jaegwang before getting into the car. Jaegwang waved until the car left through the gate. Ji-hun felt quite awkward, as it was the first time seeing his father like that.

Jeong-o reminded Ji-hun of a memory from seven years ago.

“Seven years ago, you mentioned that your father ran a snack factory. So, I thought he was the manager of the snack factory,” Jeong-o said.

“That’s not entirely wrong. The snack factory business has grown this big,” Ji-hun replied.

“Looking back, you were just as frustrating as I was back then. You never really told me about your family. I guess you were worried I’d feel burdened, but it’s surprising to finally learn about you after seven years,” Jeong-o said.

Listening to Jeong-o’s story, Ji-hun reflected on his own behavior.

If they had both taken just one step closer to each other, they could have easily grown closer, yet they had failed to realize it and missed out on many things. He decided that it shouldn’t be that way anymore.

“It was fun. I think I can come over often,” Jeong-o said, wearing a satisfied expression. Ji-hun smiled at her comment.

“Oh, and I didn’t know your brother was such a handsome guy. He looks a hundred times better in person. I wonder if there’s anyone else who looks so bad in photos.”

However, Jeong-o’s next comment made Ji-hun’s smile fade.

“He looks like you, but he has a very different vibe. He seems more mature.”

“That’s not maturity; that’s just age. He’s quite a bit older than me,” Ji-hun grumbled, clearly annoyed by Jeong-o’s praise of his brother’s looks.

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“Mom, Jeong-o is here!”

At Jeong-o’s loud call, Guksun, who was preparing dinner, rushed to the front door.

“Really? You worked hard. Did you have fun?”

“Yeah, it was fun, but home is nice,” Jeong-o replied.

Having been composed at her in-laws' house, Lee Jeong-o returned home to become the playful daughter that Guksun knew. Guksun embraced her daughter, who was now leaning against her like a child.

"What's all this, my little puppy? Did you get some gifts?"

Guksun, holding Jeong-o, extended her hand towards Ye-na. Ye-na showed Guksun what she had received from her grandfather.

"Grandma, Grandpa made candy for me! Look, my name is on it!"

"Oh my! That's amazing! Grandpa must know magic!"

"No, Grandma, it's not magic; it's handmade candy," Ye-na explained as she took some candy from the container and fed it to Guksun. Guksun accepted the candy and then asked Jeong-o.

"Was it okay? Nothing unusual happened?"

"Yeah, it was very peaceful. Everyone was really nice. Mom, do we have beer at home?"

"There should be a few in the fridge."

Guksun went to the kitchen, pulled out some beers from the fridge, and placed them on the table before asking Ji-hun, "Our Jeong-seob must be tired too; should we pour him a drink?"

"No, I'm fine," Ji-hun replied.

Jeong-o didn't wait for everyone to gather at the table and gulped down the beer. Guksun looked at her daughter with concern. Although she said everything was peaceful, it seemed she had been quite tense, considering she was looking for beer as soon as they got home.

Jeong-o quickly emptied a small beer can and then pulled out soju, as if the beer alone wasn't enough. It was a reward for herself after successfully completing her task, enjoying a drink in the warm weather.

Eventually, Guksun and Ji-hun also had a glass of soju to toast. Jeong-o kept filling her empty glass, claiming the alcohol was going down smoothly. Guksun watched as Jeong-o only picked at the melon, then said something.

“Stop eating just melon and try something else. She’s been through so much and still can’t control herself, eating all that.”

“Mom! I’m thirty now! Why are we talking about things I did when I was twelve?”

“Eating too much at night isn’t good for you. Eat in moderation.”

After giving her advice, Guksun turned her head and made eye contact with Ji-hun. Ji-hun felt a twinge of envy as he watched the mother-daughter duo. He felt sorry for his wife, who couldn’t meet her mother despite visiting her hometown.

“No, she’s our little pig; if I don’t stop her, she’ll eat too much. Your Ye-na’s dad can eat a lot.”

“Mom.”

“Yeah. Your Ye-na’s dad.”

With her intentionally warm response, Ji-hun suddenly felt a little sulky.

“Ye-na is our puppy, our princess, and Jeong-o is our little pig. But why am I just Ji-hun, Ye-na’s dad?”

“You’re not just Ji-hun. You’re our Ji-hun.”

“Still, there seems to be some favoritism.”

Thinking that Jeong-o might be tipsy after just one shot of soju, Guksun graciously accepted her son-in-law’s observation.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. What should we call our son-in-law then? What animal do you prefer?”

“Hmm… a chick?”

“…….”

“A rabbit? A squirrel? A deer?”

……She would never admit to calling him a fox.

Guksun couldn’t help but laugh at her son-in-law’s shamelessness as he continued to list only the names of small, cute animals.

As time passed, when Jeong-o went to put Ye-na to bed, Guksun cautiously asked Ji-hun about Mrs. Jang Young-mi.

“Are you still not in contact with your mother?”

“I won’t be the one to reach out first.”

Perhaps because they shared the same mother’s heart, Guksun felt a pang in her heart at Ji-hun’s indifferent response.

“There’s a saying that no parent can win against their child. It’s not that parents can’t win; they simply can’t because they love too much.”

“…….”

“They’re too precious to tear down. They’re too dear to hurt.”

“…….”

“Your mother must feel that way too, ultimately. She’ll end up coming back to our Ji-hun.”

For some reason, Guksun felt a sense of certainty. Today, Mrs. Jang Young-mi had left home not to guard the house, likely hoping that Ji-hun’s new family could at least have a comfortable time with her husband. It might have been a consideration she couldn’t express to anyone.

The hell that a mother is currently experiencing may still be unknown to her son.

Ji-hun, who had been hesitating over Guksun's comments, quietly asked, "If my mother asks me for forgiveness, should I accept it?"

"You should."

"……."

"Accept it. With open arms. Like a child."

Guksun, having offered her clear advice, got up from her seat just as Jeong-o came out of the room.

"I'll head in now, so you two have a nice time. Just don't drink too much."

"Okay, Mom. Goodnight!"

"Goodnight, Mother."

After Guksun waved and went into her room, Ji-hun also got up from his seat. Jeong-o looked tired, and he wanted her to rest quickly.

"Let's go to bed too."

"You go ahead. I'll finish this first and then sleep."

There were still a couple of glasses' worth left in the bottle. Jeong-o smiled brightly as she filled her empty glass.

She already seemed tipsy.

But that flushed look was so lovely that Ji-hun couldn't bring himself to stop her; instead, he rested his chin on his hand and quietly watched her.

As Jeong-o sipped from her glass, she looked back at Ji-hun in the same pose, as if responding to his feelings. She suddenly thought her husband was incredibly handsome.

Beautiful things often bring tears. The thought of keeping this lovely person all to himself made his heart swell, and tears began to roll down his cheeks.

He felt sorry for this man and for everything in the world.

“What’s wrong all of a sudden?”

Ji-hun quickly wiped his tears and asked.

“I’m sorry… for not taking many pictures.”

“…….”

“I should have taken more pictures of Ye-na…”

Startled, Ji-hun pulled his chair closer to her and let out a deep sigh.

She was referring to the growth records of Ye-na he had shown her before. Even after seeing plenty of Ye-na’s photos, Ji-hun felt regret for the moments he hadn’t captured, and he realized that Jeong-o shared that sentiment.

This candid confession, even when tipsy, made his heart flutter for his beloved wife.

“Lee Jeong-o, please control yourself.”

There was nothing he could do about a tipsy person, but those gem-like tears kept shaking his heart.

“You’re so beautiful right now. Did you know that?”

Ch131 - What could have happened?

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Ji-hun recalled what Jeong-o had said a little while ago. Seven years ago, he had disliked her drinking. Jeong-o had been curious about why he felt that way. Although the memories didn't come back, he felt he understood that reason.

Lee Jeong-o was just too beautiful.

Even though he knew that he shouldn't provoke a drunk person, desires began to creep up. If he felt this way now, how much more tortured had he been in the early days of their relationship?

"I should have taken pictures from every angle. I should have recorded more videos…"

Jeong-o didn't seem to understand Ji-hun's advice to be more composed as she continued to talk about Ye-na, shedding tears of regret. Her clear, shimmering eyes, filled with tears, captivated Ji-hun despite her innocent expression. He found himself mesmerized, lowering his head.

Having eaten fruit continuously and likely having snatched away plenty of Ye-na's candies, her breath smelled sweet. As she cried, her words came out as murmurs against his lips. Her voice tickled him.

Ji-hun turned his head to the side, letting out a sigh he hadn't yet voiced as he looked at Jeong-o. The moisture clinging to her eyelashes, like the tip of

a colored brush, made him feel as if his heart had become a canvas ready to be painted.

Should he stop here or somehow convince her? Torn between his conscience and desire, Ji-hun called out to Jeong-o.

“Hey.”

“Yeah.”

“…….”

“Why? Hey.”

With half-open, reddened eyes, Jeong-o called him back, her voice as sweet as the breath he had experienced. Another sigh escaped Ji-hun’s lips, which had been stiff from his turmoil.

Her gaze, touch, voice—whatever it was, Ji-hun simply couldn’t reject everything about Lee Jeong-o.

The next morning.

Drrring. Jeong-o awoke to the alarm and reached out to turn it off, only to startle and bury herself back under the covers.

Where are my clothes? Why am I like this?

She had woken up not in the master bedroom, but in the room next to it, having slept deeply. And she had taken off all her pajamas.

In the seven years she had shared a room with their child, she had never woken up like this. Even on the days when she had overindulged, she had always woken up neatly next to the child. There was no way she would have let herself appear in such a natural state.

Fortunately, her clothes were within reach. The way they were discarded was quite fresh, so Jeong-o quickly realized who had done it. She hurriedly

dressed and left the room. Laughter from Guksun could be heard from the kitchen.

“Did our son-in-law make cubed radish when I asked him to cut tofu?”

“Mom said 1.5 cm, didn’t she?”

“If you’re cutting on one side at 1.5 cm, then why did you do that all around?”

“Still, I’m better than Jeong-o, right?”

“Is that even a valid point?”

Mrs. Lee Guksun was so cheerful that her laughter flowed with every word. As Jeong-o got closer, she saw her mother and husband happily cooking together in the kitchen. The matching aprons they wore made Jeong-o’s eyes sting for some reason.

“Are you awake?”

Ji-hun, who had been chatting with Guksun, noticed Jeong-o first and asked.

“Oppa, you need to get ready for work.”

“Oh right, I need to hurry. What would our director think if I’m like this in the morning?”

With Jeong-o’s urging, Guksun added her own comments. Finally, Ji-hun took off his apron and left the kitchen. Jeong-o pulled him by the hand and led him to an empty room to ask,

“What happened last night?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I woke up without any clothes on.”

“Must have been really hot.”

“Ha! Do you think I wouldn’t know?”

Even as Jeong-o got flustered, Ji-hun shrugged nonchalantly. Although he was being infuriating, there wasn’t time for a long back-and-forth. Jeong-o narrowed her eyes and warned him,

“I’ll let it slide this time.”

“…….”

“If it happens again, I’ll do the same thing to you. No more passes.”

“Hmm, that sounds even better.”

Her threat didn’t faze him at all.

Smack! In the end, Ji-hun received a light hit on the arm from Jeong-o.

“Ow. That hurts. Hey.”

Ji-hun pouted and narrowed his eyes, but Jeong-o didn’t relent.

“What could have happened to you in those seven years?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Somehow, you seem like a much upgraded pervert compared to seven years ago.”

“I think you’re misunderstanding a lot. I didn’t do anything. Really. And—”

“…….”

“If you’re reacting that way over that, our married life is going to be quite surprising and mysterious.”

…What’s so mysterious about it?

Jeong-o let out a sigh of disbelief and shouted into the air,

“I’m never drinking again!”

“Great. That’s what I was hoping for. Don’t drink.”

With Jeong-o’s determination, Ji-hun eagerly piled on his own wish.

Lee Jeong-o, you have no idea how conscientious and kind I am. For a lifetime.

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A day that stood in stark contrast to the peacefulness of home.

Although it was nice that Yena chose her dad to accompany her to the Go tournament, the tasks left unfinished due to his absence began to weigh heavily on Ji-hun from Monday morning.

Amidst the chaos, news kept coming in: the Chief Justice’s resignation and the nomination of a new Chief Justice candidate.

Without any surprises, the judge nominated by the Blue House as the Chief Justice candidate was Chae Seo-bok.

Once the appointment consent bill submitted by the government to the National Assembly is processed, a confirmation hearing will be held. Judge Chae Seo-bok, having already gone through a confirmation hearing when becoming a Supreme Court Justice, was expected to become Chief Justice without any issues.

Thinking about this made Ji-hun’s mouth feel dry. He knew he wouldn’t be in contact with the Chae Eun-yeop family anymore, nor would his parents visit, yet he still felt uneasy.

If Chae Seo-bok became Chief Justice, it felt as if the Seon Group would somehow be in danger. He had a heavy premonition that Chae Seo-bok, who had been interested in politics, might collude with members of the National Assembly to exert pressure on the group.

Regardless, there was no room for Chae Eun-yeop to intrude into Ji-hun's day. He pushed through a busy schedule and visited a hypnosis counseling center in the afternoon. After managing to get the household affairs somewhat organized, he was able to restart counseling.

"Mr. Ji-hun, it's been a while since we last saw each other. I see your spouse didn't come with you today."

The doctor warmly welcomed Ji-hun, who had come back after a long absence.

"Yes. Work has been busy, and I wanted to focus on regular counseling today instead of hypnosis."

"That sounds good. We can resume hypnosis treatment when you feel less resistant. How have you been feeling lately?"

"I feel very good. My new family is wonderful, and I'm experiencing a sense of belonging that I've never felt before. This morning, I helped my mother-in-law with cooking; I didn't do much, but it was more enjoyable than I expected."

"Is it your first time cooking?"

"No, I think I've cooked for my wife seven years ago. I don't remember it, though."

"……."

"I didn't try hard to remember it; I just enjoyed it."

A smile reminiscent of this morning appeared on Ji-hun's lips as he answered.

"On Sunday, I met with my older brother and sorted out some long-held feelings. I learned about difficulties I hadn't considered, and I realized I had only been thinking about myself."

The doctor observed Ji-hun’s more relaxed demeanor. Unlike before, there was little sign of anxiety in his eyes, indicating that he was regaining his stability.

“And recently, I met a friend from 24 years ago. He’s someone I’ve been thinking about a lot lately.”

“Why have you been thinking about him?”

“I think I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

The doctor nodded for a long time. The ultimate goal of regular hypnosis therapy is to release the suppressed self.

In that sense, there could be no greater therapy for Ji-hun than a stable life. Perhaps the people supporting him now could become even better therapists than himself.

“Why do you want to regain those memories? Aren’t you already happy enough? Wouldn’t it be okay just to have peace of mind?”

“I’m not obsessing over it. It’s just… I want to give my wife a gift.”

“…….”

“I think it would be lonely to remember all the time alone while forgetting it. I want to remember at least something. I want to show that I’m still trying.”

Ji-hun’s serious response made the doctor smile.

“You are truly in a healthy relationship, Ji-hun.”

Ji-hun felt a renewed sense of support from the doctor.

“Yes, let’s work hard together. I’m sure we can bring back at least something precious.”

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Eun-bi went to the hospital for the first time. It was her first proper gynecological exam.

“I’m not married yet, but I’ll be coming back soon with my husband,” she told the doctor before the exam. She was bothered by the doctor’s gaze, which seemed to see her as an unwed mother with a troubled pregnancy.

The doctor nodded dryly and guided her to the examination table. This was the first time Eun-bi saw her baby. The little one was comfortably nestled in the small space, resembling a teddy bear.

“The size is about 8 weeks and 2 days. The heartbeat sounds good,” the doctor said while showing her the heartbeat. Eun-bi’s heart raced in surprise.

The baby was bigger than she expected. It would have been nice to meet Ham Dae-geun a day earlier. It wouldn’t have been easy to deceive him in the early stages of pregnancy when the baby’s appearance changes so rapidly.

Should I really consider giving up the baby?

Her brother Eun-yeop probably believed she had already gotten rid of the baby. However, in her current state, she couldn’t take any medication. If it failed, she would be destined to suffer twice as much.

If this got back to her parents, or to Ham Dae-geun, or to anyone else, Eun-yeop’s words would ring true: her life would end up in the trash.

She left the hospital, weighed down by her worries.

As soon as she stepped outside, her mother called.

[What have you been doing that you haven’t been reachable?] Her mother was already angry as soon as she answered the phone.

“I was busy.”

[What could you possibly be busy with? A girl who doesn’t even work.] “…….”

[Come home and bring some side dishes for your brother.] “Why should I bring side dishes if he’s not even going to eat them?”

[You know he never eats enough in one go. At least try to take after your brother a little.] “…….”

[Your brother is a busy person. How would you feel if there’s nothing to eat at home when he’s hungry?] All they cared about was her brother. After her relationship with Ji-hun fell apart, her parents treated Eun-bi even more coldly. Yet she still found herself yearning for their affection, feeling pathetic for it.

Eun-bi grumbled as she stopped by her parents’ house to gather her brother’s side dishes. The bundle was heavy, and she had to set it down several times before finally making her way to her brother’s home. By the time she arrived, she was drenched in sweat.

After placing the side dishes in the refrigerator, Eun-bi let out a sigh of relief. The TV was playing news about her father.

Chief Justice Chae Seo-bok. She felt a mix of pride and excitement. Indeed, they were a remarkable family in anyone’s eyes.

Eun-bi gathered her energy and started tidying up the house. She did the laundry, emptied the trash, and organized the mess, all while contemplating the baby.

Should she give up the baby or continue to protect it? Giving up felt physically dangerous, while keeping it felt emotionally perilous. As Eun-bi worked diligently, her hands suddenly froze at a crossroads of decision.

She opened her brother’s desk drawer to place some documents. Inside was a phone she had never seen before. It was in a zip-lock bag. An uneasy curiosity tugged at her fingertips. She knew she shouldn’t, but she was almost entranced as she opened the bag.

The phone was powered off. However, when she pressed the power button for a long time, the screen lit up. The phone still had battery life left.

Her heart raced as she gazed at the phone, beating wildly like the baby she had just met. And then—

“Ah!”

As the home screen appeared, Eun-bi let out a startled scream and dropped the phone.

A familiar face filled the screen.

Kim Jin-gu. It was Kim Jin-gu’s phone.

Her brother had killed Kim Jin-gu!

Ch132 - True Madness

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Eun-yeob received substantial financial support from Ham Dae-geun. As soon as he heard the news that their father had been nominated as the next Chief Justice, Dae-geun came with cash in hand.

Dae-geun was quick-witted, which made things easier in many ways. Once the special committee for the personnel hearing was formed, he would quietly begin backdoor dealings with the National Assembly members on the committee. Eun-yeob had felt overwhelmed about how to help his father after Jung Ji-heon cut ties with the family, but thanks to his foolish brother, things became much easier.

Feeling pleased with today's achievements, Eun-yeob left work early and ran into Eun-bi at home. He had heard from their mother that Eun-bi would be bringing side dishes, but he hadn't expected her to still be at home.

"Why are you still here?"

His sister had a disgruntled look on her face.

"Oppa, don't you have anything to say to me?"

"What now?"

"Kim Jin-gu. You did this, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Then what is this?"

Eun-yeob’s eyes widened as he recognized the phone in Eun-bi’s hand.

“Are you crazy? Why are you snooping around someone else’s house?”

Eun-yeob quickly snatched the phone from her, checking its status. The phone was on, but fortunately, airplane mode hadn’t been disabled.

“You didn’t turn off airplane mode, did you? If you did, we’re both dead.”

“How could you say that?”

Eun-yeob was taken aback by Eun-bi’s panicked outburst.

“What’s wrong with you, Cha Eun-bi? Do you not understand the situation? You have no right to be angry at me. You should be thanking me!”

“What?”

“Do you think I did this for myself? This is all because of you! Because of the lie you told seven years ago! You were the one who was threatened by Kim Jin-gu! I had no choice but to get rid of him!”

With each word, Eun-yeob’s voice grew louder. Tears welled up in Eun-bi’s eyes.

“You should just quietly appreciate your brother’s capabilities and live your life. Get married, keep your mouth shut, and take care of the house so you can have peace of mind.”

“Why do you keep bringing up marriage? Why do I have to get married so urgently?”

“Then what can you do?”

For a moment, Eun-yeob lowered his voice, as if trying to calm Eun-bi, but then he snapped again. Eun-bi wanted to argue back, but she had no words left. She knew all too well that in this household, aside from marriage, she was of no use.

“Dad is going to be the Chief Justice soon. He needs Ham Dae-geun for that. So just do your part. All you have to do is behave well.”

“……”

“If you really dislike Ham Dae-geun, talk about it later. After you get married and return the inheritance, I’ll make sure it’s handled safely. Just hang in there for a few years.”

“Are you saying you can kill the man who’s going to be my husband?”

“If you don’t like that, stop whining and just live well!”

Eun-bi squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them again, overwhelmed by her brother’s furious outburst.

“Cha Eun-bi. Marriage is the best filial duty you can do. Do you understand? Don’t make things difficult for Dad, and behave properly.”

Her brother was a monster.

***

A Busy Day

Even after dinner time had passed and there was still no contact from Ji-heon, Jung Oh felt a bit worried.

‘I wonder if the counseling went well…’

Should she call him? Maybe not; he could have other schedules.

Unsure since she hadn’t heard about any other plans, Jung Oh hesitated but eventually stood up.

She received a call suggesting a meeting about new product ideas at Daewon Liquor. As she headed to the conference room, her teammate Song Gi-hoon followed her.

“Remi Remi is coming.”

“Ah, the one who’s gone too far and is a bit crazy?”

Jung Oh chuckled at the nickname given by the production team. However, Gi-hoon’s expression was serious. He was genuinely concerned about Jung Oh.

“Yeah. I think it’s fine if you don’t attend if you’re uncomfortable,” Gi-hoon suggested.

“But I can’t do that. We’re all in this together, and it’s not like anything major will happen. It’s okay.”

Jung Oh confidently walked into the meeting room.

The meeting included members from Production Team 1 as well as Jung Oh and Gi-hoon from Production Team 2. By chance, Jung Oh was the only woman present.

A little while later, the head and deputy head of the planning team arrived with three clients. Among them were two employees from Daewon Liquor, whom she had met once at a drinking event, along with Remi Remi.

“Hello, Team Leader Ahn. I came because you hadn’t shown up in a while,” Remi Remi said as she extended her hand for a handshake with Team Leader Ahn Chan-seob.

“Yes, thank you for coming. Please have a seat. You remember our production team members, right?”

“I do remember, but… who is that?”

Remi Remi squinted and pointed her chin toward Jung Oh.

“This is Jung Oh, a copywriter from Production Team 2. She’s the key contributor to the summer product advertisement,” Team Leader Ahn

introduced.

Despite the introduction, Remi Remi wore a lukewarm expression.

“Where’s Manager Cha Eun-bi? She’s quite efficient and does her job well.”

Leaning closer to Jung Oh, Remi Remi asked, “What does this Assistant Manager do well?”

“I’ll try to create good copy,” Jung Oh replied awkwardly, forcing a smile. Remi Remi shook her head as if unimpressed and then took a seat.

“Ahem, the reason I came all the way here is…”

Remi Remi cleared her throat loudly.

“Collaborative beer brands are all the rage these days, aren’t they? So, we at Daewon Liquor are also thinking of creating a collaboration brand. Since our advertising agency, Max Planning, is an affiliate of Seoryeon Group, which is known for Seoryeon Foods, there are many hit products there. I think a collaboration with those hit products could yield a great product.”

“First, we need to discuss this with Seoryeon Foods. Do you have any specific products in mind?”

“I’ll have to look for them. In any case, we can negotiate with Seoryeon Foods, right?”

Remi Remi came just to hear opinions without any proposals in hand.

“I’ll do my best,” the planning team leader replied.

“Then what product should we choose?”

At Remi Remi’s question, the meeting room fell silent.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen it this quiet. Are we making you uncomfortable to the point you can’t speak properly? Should we lighten the mood?”

“No, that’s not it. Ideas don’t just pop up every time…”

The head of Production Team 1 responded to Remi Remi’s query, but she ignored his answer and pointed at Jung Oh.

“Assistant Manager Jung?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you have any ideas?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“If you can’t think of anything right away, at least try to lighten the mood. That’s how fresh ideas come out.”

“…How do I do that?”

“Why are you asking me? Just do it however you want. Dance or sing or something.”

That can’t be right. This client is something else…

Jung Oh’s expression stiffened at Remi Remi’s ridiculous demand. The others looked equally shocked.

“Is it a bit much here? Then should we move to another place? It would probably be more comfortable somewhere else, right?”

Since Jung Oh didn’t respond, Remi Remi gestured to the youngest member of the planning team. The AE, realizing Remi Remi’s intentions, stood up in surprise.

“…Should I look for a venue for a company dinner?”

“Wow. As expected, quick on your feet.”

Remi Remi gave a thumbs-up to the junior AE. After the AE left the meeting room to find a venue, Remi Remi again directed her attention

toward Jung Oh, complaining.

“Ugh. This is why production is hopeless. AEs do whatever you tell them, but why is production like this? Which university did this assistant graduate from? It’s always the ones from lesser schools that have the highest noses.”

Should I endure this just once more?

No, if I put up with this now, my juniors might suffer even more later.

Clenching her fists, Jung Oh cautiously raised her voice.

“Manager, I’m a little worried about what I’m about to say. If you cross the line with content unrelated to work…”

“What? Cross the line?”

Before Jung Oh could finish her sentence, Remi Remi’s face turned crimson, and she yelled back.

“Look at how this assistant talks. Why is Max Planning like this these days? Aren’t you managing your employees? Are you teaching them to talk back to clients nowadays?”

At that moment,

“What did I just hear?”

The slightly ajar door swung wide open, and Ji-heon walked in. Behind him stood Deputy Manager Go Eun-joo.

Upon hearing Remi Remi’s shouting from outside, Ji-heon’s expression hardened ominously. The atmosphere in the meeting room grew as cold as ice. Remi Remi’s flushed face turned pale.

“Oh, Director, that’s… ahem, cough.”

Remi Remi cleared her throat to gather her thoughts before responding.

“I’m personally friends with Assistant Manager Jung. We’re like siblings in private, just joking around, and we were just messing around, right, Team Leader Kim?”

“Uh… yeah…”

The planning team leader, in an awkward position, dragged out his answer.

Ji-heon called Jung Oh’s name.

“Assistant Manager Jung?”

“Yes.”

“Please tell us directly. Honestly.”

“…”

“Are you close with Manager Eom Seok-ki? Are you like siblings in private?”

“…”

“When did you meet outside of work?”

What do you mean by siblings? This is the first time I’m hearing the name Eom Seok-ki.

Jung Oh wanted to scream, but she needed time to think. It was a crossroads of choices.

If she said she wasn’t close with that guy, Daewon Liquor might become displeased and terminate the contract, and her colleagues in the same department might resent her. However, if she lied and said she was close to him, she would surely get scolded by Jeong Ji-heon.

Jung Oh didn’t know how she would be scolded, but somehow, she found Ji-heon much scarier than her colleagues.

So she spoke the truth.

“…I met him once at a tasting event. We only exchanged greetings briefly, and we are not close at all.”

“Manager Eom, please stand up.”

Ji-heon called out Remi Remi in a voice that had grown even colder. Remi Remi swallowed hard and stood up.

“I’m no longer interested in doing business with your company, so get lost.”

“What? What…?”

Remi Remi stammered, barely managing to speak after Ji-heon’s icy demeanor.

“Director, even so, this is… We’re the clients, and how much do we have contracted with Max Planning…?”

“Stop talking nonsense and just get lost, you idiot.”

Wow. Eun-joo, who was watching from beside Ji-heon, lit up with excitement. She honestly wanted to applaud. It was the first time she’d seen someone pronounce the double-s sound so crisply.

Moreover, his gaze was so intense it seemed like he could snap the client’s neck with just one hand.

That’s true madness.

That man is really insane.

Even though I brought him into the meeting room, I’m a bit worried now. I wonder how he plans to deal with the aftermath later.

Eun-joo felt a mix of exhilaration and concern. It was the first time she had genuinely worried for someone’s well-being.

Feeling the threat of being strangled, Remi Remi's lips turned pale as she fumbled over her words. The two employees she had brought with her also ended up bolting without even properly saying goodbye.

Even after Remi Remi left, the atmosphere in the meeting room remained tense.

Ji-heon, seated in the empty chair, surveyed the room with a displeased expression and spoke up.

"Have you all been silent while the client crosses the line with their remarks until now?"

Well, they are the clients.

A retort everyone dared not say was bubbling in their throats.

"Team Leader Kim."

"Yes, Director."

"Please collect reports on instances of unreasonable demands from clients from the employees by tomorrow."

"…Understood."

"I'll take care of all matters concerning Daewon Liquor from now on. Please forward all communications from Daewon Liquor to me."

"Yes."

"Don't be intimidated and get back to work. The company doesn't distribute salaries based on how badly it's hurt."

Although Ji-heon told them not to be intimidated, everyone sat frozen in place. People were afraid of Ji-heon in a way that was completely different from how they felt about Remi Remi—much more intense.

With a sigh, Ji-heon stood up.

“And…”

However, as Ji-heon walked toward the meeting room door, he turned back for a moment. The employees were startled by his words.

“I’ll be making an official announcement this week, but I’ll let you all know first.”

His voice softened slightly.

“I recently got married.”

The eyes of the Production Team 2 members, including Jung Oh, widened, while others blinked in surprise. The quick-witted team leader from the Planning Team was the first to extend his congratulations.

“Ah… Congratulations, Director.”

“Thank you, but I’m not saying this to receive congratulations; my wife works at this company.”

“…At Max Planning?”

“Jung Oh is my wife.”

The mouths of those who heard this for the first time at that moment dropped open in unison. Jung Oh’s face turned the same color as the tteokbokki she had eaten for lunch.

“I just wanted to mention it first in case there was any misunderstanding.”

Eun-joo was struggling to suppress her laughter, finding it too funny.

What misunderstanding? You’re just itching to say it.

You’ve done it again. Director Jeong Ji-heon, coming to work to protect Jung Oh.

Anyway, if this company is this entertaining, I’ll have to work hard here.

Unexpectedly, a sense of corporate pride blossomed within her.

Ch133 - I Want to Take the Call

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After Ji-heon left the meeting room, everyone's attention turned to Jung Oh.

"Uh… uh… So, Jung Oh, you got married. With the director…"

"So that's why the director rushed over?"

The team leaders from the Planning Team and Production Team 1 spoke in shock. Ko Eun-joo answered in place of Jung Oh.

"I called the director. Since the client, Remiremi, was here, I thought he should come to see."

Eun-joo quickly made an excuse, but both Jung Oh and Eun-joo knew the truth. Jeong Ji-heon had come to protect Jung Oh.

Jung Oh bowed her head.

"I'm sorry for not mentioning it sooner."

"It's fine. Congratulations. So, you're still going to keep working after getting married, right?"

Team Leader Ahn Chan-seop asked cautiously, waving his hands.

"Of course. Please speak comfortably, just like before."

A long sigh from Ahn Chan-seop passed along to the Planning Team leader beside him, and then to the colleague next to that leader, like a domino effect.

The meeting had fallen apart, and it was too awkward to stay any longer, so Jung Oh quickly tidied her things and stood up. As soon as she left the meeting room, she rushed toward Ji-heon’s office before anyone else could follow her.

When she barged in, Ji-heon looked at her with a perplexed expression.

Jung Oh approached him, tightening her lips, and threw a glance.

“You swear a lot, don’t you?”

“What’s it to you? I won’t see them again.”

“But you swore in front of the employees.”

“So what? You honestly felt relieved, too.”

“…Anyway, fathers shouldn’t swear.”

“Why not? Just because you’re a father doesn’t mean you’re not a person.”

“You shouldn’t. It sets a bad example. What if you do it in front of your kid?”

“Why would I swear in front of a kid?”

Even after revealing his true colors in front of the staff, he didn’t seem to regret it at all.

“Anyway, you can’t say anything about that. In unavoidable situations, you might have to.”

“…”

“I thought I was going to kill you when you said you were close to me.”

Hearing him say that felt too genuine.

Feeling a chill, Jung Oh quickly changed the subject.

“Wow, Jeong Ji-heon has changed so much. Seven years ago, you were an innocent young man who talked to flowers and butterflies.”

“Are you saying that because my memory is fading?”

Ji-heon chuckled in disbelief at Jung Oh’s exaggerated joke.

It felt refreshing to have chased Remiremi away, but Jung Oh was worried about the consequences. That’s why she hurried over.

Although Ji-heon was part of the owner’s family, the company did not belong to him. If this incident became known, he could face even more significant backlash simply because he was the owner’s son.

“What are you going to do? What about Daewon Liquor?”

At Jung Oh’s prodding, Ji-heon set his phone down on the table and pressed a button on the screen. The voice he had heard earlier came out.

[Why are you asking me? Just handle it yourself! Dance or sing or something.] [Ugh. This is why production is a mess. AE will do anything you tell them to, but production doesn’t work like that. Where did this agent go to college? You know, those who didn’t go to good schools have such big egos.]

He had recorded Remiremi’s abusive remarks. If Daewon Liquor made a fuss about this incident, he could simply show them the recording. Jung Oh’s mouth dropped open.

“Jeong Ji-heon… you’re really meticulous, aren’t you?”

“What? Why did you stop talking?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“You were going to say I’m really meticulous, weren’t you?”

“Oh, no. I would never say something so vulgar. Absolutely not.”

After scolding Ji-heon for swearing, Jung Oh hurriedly feigned innocence and took Ji-heon's phone.

"But didn't you record the part where you swore? I want to hear that again."

"You just said not to."

"It's not okay for you to say it, but it's fine for me to listen."

Puhuh.

A few minutes ago, when she heard Remiremi's voice in front of the meeting room, Jung Oh was filled with anger. Though she still hadn't gotten to hit Remiremi and had only driven him away, she felt somewhat relieved thanks to her contradictory feelings. Because of Lee Jung Oh, her life was never dull.

Ji-heon grabbed Jung Oh, who was mindlessly pressing the buttons on her phone screen, and turned her face toward him. The sweet breath he exhaled made her forget the fatigue of the day.

***

Thursday: As Ji-heon had warned, the news of his marriage registration was reported. The article was simple, devoid of any photographs or gossip about amnesia or hidden children, containing only straightforward facts.

Nevertheless, bouquets kept pouring in for Ji-heon, and the office was bustling.

By afternoon, the rumor that Ji-heon's bride was Jung Oh spread throughout the company. Whenever Jung Oh passed by, people greeted her joyfully, offering congratulations.

"It's amazing. No one's asking how a single mother got married to a bachelor, and no one's begging for behind-the-scenes stories or giving hints or whispering. Everyone's just congratulating me," Jung Oh remarked to Eun-joo during her trip to the bathroom, receiving long greetings.

“Didn’t you know? I posted it in the group chat,” Eun-joo replied.

“Was it Ko’s doing?”

“Yes. The director said to let everyone know so that you wouldn’t get tired answering everyone.”

Eun-joo showed her the group chat screen, where Jung Oh hadn’t been active.

– Lee Jung Oh is the daughter of Director Jeong Ji-heon. The director lost his memory in an accident seven years ago, which led to a breakup with this agent, but they recently met again. And they got married.

Following Ko Eun-joo’s short and dry explanation, exclamations like “Oh my!” and “Wow!” flooded in.

“It’s not just me. Ki-hoon probably posted it in his active group chat too, and Assistant Manager Park likely posted it as well,” Eun-joo added, pointing to Ki-hoon and Young-gwang.

Jung Oh felt a bit dazed to realize that all sorts of maneuvers had taken place without her knowing. She had anticipated that once the news of her marriage registration broke, all kinds of rumors would spread and a storm would ensue.

Thinking she would have to brace herself for something she had to go through at least once, she was surprised by the relatively calm reactions, which had a secret behind them.

“I’m just a regular employee, so I was just following what the director told me. Is that okay?”

“Of course, of course! You did that for me,” Jung Oh replied.

“Lately, the director’s image is nothing like it used to be; it’s gotten really good. The last time he chased away Remiremi, his popularity skyrocketed. It’s great that good news came during such a good time, so everyone must be thrilled.”

“Thank you, Ko Eun-joo.”

“Then you should treat me to a meal. Something delicious.”

“Oh, of course! I’ll treat you to something really tasty and expensive.”

At Jung Oh’s fluttering smile, Eun-joo shrugged her shoulders like a coy girl, while inwardly feeling a bit worried. Still, she felt proud of Jung Oh’s reaction.

***

Through a friend’s message, Eun-bi learned of Ji-heon’s marriage and lamented pathetically. While her own life was spiraling down, Lee Jung Oh had hit the jackpot and was living in luxury.

Bitterly, Eun-bi didn’t want to contact anyone, yet she kept receiving messages from Ham Dae-geun. He was being quite bothersome. Unable to bring herself to block him completely, she ignored all his messages.

Not wanting to respond to text messages, she sent a separate message to Eun-yeob, asking her to say she was sick if Dae-geun came looking for her.

Her body wasn’t in the best shape either. She felt a strange twinge in her lower abdomen, a moment of realization that she wasn’t unencumbered after all.

Could it be a miscarriage? She wondered if it would be better to just have a surgery. Dragging her exhausted body, Eun-bi made her way to the hospital.

“You’re back again so soon,” the doctor greeted her.

Eun-bi explained her reasons for returning. On one hand, she hoped the baby would disappear without a trace.

“Yes, my lower abdomen keeps aching. I’m worried there might be something wrong with my body,” she replied.

“I see. It seems the uterus might be weak…”

The doctor looked concerned as he immediately checked the status of the fetus. His tone quickly brightened.

“It’s moving around quite well! In fact, it’s grown a lot since your last visit!”

Eun-bi’s eyes widened at the doctor’s examination. On the monitor appeared the image of a baby resembling a teddy bear, accompanied by a strong heartbeat.

“We can consider it 9 weeks along.”

“But you said it was 8 weeks and 2 days on Monday,” Eun-bi pointed out.

“There can be some variance depending on the baby’s movements or the angle of the equipment. Still, it’s growing quite well,” he explained.

“…”

“Since the baby is growing quickly, you need to ensure you’re getting enough nutrients. Make sure to eat a balanced diet and take your supplements. If you notice anything unusual, come in at any time.”

The doctor genuinely smiled, pleased that the baby was doing well. Eun-bi couldn’t bring herself to cry; she stood there with a blank expression. The doctor, having seen many expectant mothers like her, was perceptive. He cautiously tried to encourage Eun-bi.

“I think your uterus may be naturally weak. If you give up now, it might be hard to conceive again. You need to stay strong.”

With heavy footsteps, Eun-bi left the hospital. In the meantime, she received another message from a friend. A friend who still thought she worked at Max Planning congratulated her on her marriage.

The article mentioned “a copywriter from the same company,” so she knew such messages would keep coming for a while. She even began to suspect that Ji-heon and Jung Oh were deliberately trying to stir things up.

There was nothing in her life that she could control.

No, there was one thing: whether to keep the baby or give it up.

As she lamented her unmanageable life, the thought that her life and her unborn child's life mirrored each other brought tears to her eyes. For the first time, she felt sorry for the baby— for having a mother like her…

***

After the news of his second son's marriage broke, Jae-gwang received congratulations as well, just like Ji-heon. Since they hadn't held the wedding yet, he politely declined gifts, but his office quickly filled with flowers.

Even those who came for work congratulated Jae-gwang.

"Chairman, I heard you've welcomed a granddaughter. Congratulations!"

"Thank you. Would you like to see a picture of my granddaughter?"

Jae-gwang didn't miss the opportunity to show off his granddaughter's drawing to his guests. He didn't even wait for them to ask; he immediately brought it out.

"Oh, what a wonderful piece of art!"

"That's me! You can tell just by looking at it, right?"

"…It does look like you. Very well done."

"Right? She's only seven, but she has a genius talent."

Jae-gwang was discovering a new happiness in life. Of course, there were considerable side effects. He constantly wanted to see the child. He found himself entering and deleting his granddaughter's phone number in his mobile phone at least a dozen times a day.

"Chairman, the meeting is ready."

“Okay.”

Today, once again, Jae-gwang absentmindedly stared at his phone screen before heading into the meeting.

He regretted not having told her to call him every day. He didn’t want to be the kind of grandfather who nagged his granddaughter, so he hadn’t set a specific time for her to call. But if he had known it would weigh on him this much, he would have designated a day and time for her calls.

“The sector that has shown the most significant growth in our business expansion into Indonesia is…”

As the presenter spoke, he considered focusing on the presentation when his phone suddenly lit up. The words “Princess Ye-na” filled the screen, making Jae-gwang’s eyes widen in disbelief. His heart raced wildly.

However, the timing wasn’t ideal. This was an important meeting. As the head of the group, he couldn’t afford to get distracted with dozens of executives present. His lips felt parched.

“Chairman, is something bothering you?”

“Oh, no, no, just water.”

“There’s water right here.”

Though water was already in front of him, the secretary placed it closer, as if Jae-gwang hadn’t seen it.

Jae-gwang didn’t touch the water; he kept staring at his phone.

I want to answer it. I want to take the call.

But in his moment of agony, the call was cut off. It felt as if the lifeline of affection had snapped.

“Phew…”

Jae-gwang’s deep sigh silenced the room.

“Ah, please, don’t mind me, continue.”

He waved his hand dismissively at the presenter, who had paused due to his sigh.

“With the recent wave of Hallyu, interest in domestic brands has significantly increased…”

At that moment, the phone rang again!

The spark of hope reignited!

Unable to contain himself, Jae-gwang stood up from his seat.

“Let’s take a 30-minute break and resume the meeting afterward.”

He clutched his phone to his chest and hurriedly left the meeting room.

Ch134 - It Won't Be Long Now

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As soon as Jae-gwang stepped out of the meeting room, he pressed the call button.

[Grandpa!] His granddaughter’s cute voice sent a delightful shiver through his heart.

“Hey there! Have you eaten yet?”

The eyes of the secretary standing next to Jae-gwang widened. His voice seemed to have risen a full octave while talking to his granddaughter.

It was astonishing to hear such a lighthearted tone from their solemn and serious chairman. It made the secretary worry that Jae-gwang might float away with such a weightless voice.

Of course, Jae-gwang couldn’t care less about the secretary’s surprise.

[I had lunch, but I haven’t had dinner yet.] “Okay, you need to eat! I wonder why my princess called me?”

[Grandpa, I finished all the candy.] “You ate it all?”

[Yes.] “Good job! I’ll make you some more. Should I make it in the shape of an animal this time?”

[Yes!] “What animal should I make?”

[A kangaroo!] A kangaroo. Kangaroo accepted.

Though it would be a challenge to make, it wasn’t impossible. This was an opportunity to show he was worthy of being the grandfather of baby Picasso.

“Alright. I’ll make it for you, so tell your mom to bring you over again, okay?”

[Okay! Goodbye, Grandpa!] Already hanging up?

The call was short. After conveying her message, his granddaughter said her goodbye coolly.

Jae-gwang, not wanting to be seen as a clingy grandfather, quickly accepted it.

“Okay, okay. Enjoy your dinner, my princess!”

[Yes!] With a cheerful reply, the call ended abruptly. Jae-gwang stared blankly at his phone. The end of their happy conversation marked the beginning of another long wait.

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Eun-yeob was troubled by the employee from the genetics research lab. Due to the pressure at work, he was considering quitting and persistently contacted Eun-yeob, demanding that he take responsibility for his living expenses since he had suffered because of Eun-yeob.

Eun-yeob had set aside funds specifically for the employee from the genetics lab. This was something he couldn’t disclose to Ham Dae-geun, so he had to be cautious.

The situation with Eun-bi and her friend receiving lawsuits was also a troublesome matter. Until their father received the appointment as the Chief Justice, they had to avoid any noisy situations, as even trivial lawsuits could become fodder for reporters.

Ultimately, Eun-yeob decided he needed to visit Ji-heon.

As he entered the lobby of Max Planning, he received a call from Ham Dae-geun. Eun-yeob answered the phone with a friendly tone.

“Yes, Director.”

[Lawyer, you’re working, right?] “I’m working, but I always have time to take your call. What’s on your mind?”

[Eun-bi hasn’t been responding. She hasn’t answered her phone for several days. I was worried that she might be sick.] “Ah….”

Eun-yeob dragged out his voice. He saw Ji-heon passing by in the distance, likely returning to the office after an external schedule.

“She seems to be feeling a bit unwell. I’ll tell her to contact you.”

Eun-yeob hurriedly ended the call and ran over to Ji-heon.

“Ji-heon!”

At the sound of his name, Ji-heon turned his head.

He looked at Eun-yeob with a face as if he were looking at something insignificant, which stirred frustration within Eun-yeob. Although anger boiled inside, he managed to smile.

“I heard the news. Congratulations on your wedding.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

Just as Ji-heon shot back with a curt reply and was about to turn away, Eun-yeob grabbed him again.

“You know Eun-bi has been struggling lately, right? And now she’s received a lawsuit too; she’s in a terrible situation. I heard her friend also received a lawsuit, and Eun-bi feels like she’s going to die from the pressure on both sides.”

Like a swan paddling furiously beneath the water while maintaining an elegant and dignified appearance above, it wasn't easy to manipulate things behind the scenes unnoticed. Eun-yeob decided to suppress his pride, focusing solely on one goal.

"If you push Eun-bi too hard, it might look like you have lingering feelings for her. Let's just consider it a minor incident and move on. We still have old ties, right?"

"Because I thought of those old ties, I've only filed two lawsuits for now. I'll have to keep an eye on things moving forward."

Eun-yeob's persuasion elicited a matching smile from Ji-heon. That arrogant smile, born from having reigned from above since birth, one that had never seen the filth of the world, rubbed Eun-yeob the wrong way.

"Have fun running around for a while. Do whatever you want."

"……"

"Since our country's laws take time to deal with scum like you, you're still wandering the world freely, but that won't last much longer."

Ji-heon's words were ominous. Eun-yeob couldn't shake the chilling thought that just as he was flailing desperately, Ji-heon might also be secretly plotting something beneath the surface. His fists clenched tightly at his sides.

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Eun-bi lay still at home. With her phone turned off, she had nothing to occupy herself with, so she stared blankly at the ultrasound photo of her baby from the hospital.

At 2.5 cm, this tiny being, smaller than two finger joints, was taking over her body and mind. She felt resentment at this life that had settled in her body without permission, yet at the same time, she felt pity for it as a life.

So small that it couldn’t decide its own fate, Eun-bi was the only one who could choose between life and death for the child.

As she was lost in these thoughts, the doorbell rang. At first, she ignored it since no one was supposed to come, but soon the knocking grew louder, prompting her to get up.

“Chae Eun-bi, I know you’re in there. Open the door.”

“Huh.”

Ham Dae-geun’s voice came through. He had come over without any notice. Well, considering that she had turned off her phone, he had no way of reaching her.

Eun-bi didn’t want to open the door, but since she thought her neighbors might complain, she reluctantly did. However, she couldn’t hide her displeasure.

“Director, what’s this about…?”

Dae-geun walked in without even a greeting. He looked different from the usual gentlemanly demeanor she was used to. His previously gentle attitude was nowhere to be found. Eun-bi felt scared by Dae-geun’s fierce expression, and in her desire to be respected, she shouted back.

“Even if we’re supposed to get married, this is rude!”

“What? Rude? Rude?”

Dae-geun, who had been looking around, shouted at Eun-bi with bloodshot eyes.

“I thought something was off.”

Dae-geun pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and showed it to Eun-bi. It was her medical records from the hospital. Since he hadn’t been able to get in touch with her, he had done some digging out of suspicion.

“How… how could you do this?”

Eun-bi was equally taken aback. Dae-geun turned his head toward her, then spotted a photo tucked under a pillow behind her.

“Ah…!”

Eun-bi tried to block him, but she couldn’t overpower Dae-geun’s brute strength.

Dae-geun picked up the photo. Eun-bi’s vision went white.

The photo contained her name, the gestational age and size of the fetus, and the image of the fetus itself—irrefutable proof of the child’s existence.

Dae-geun trembled as he spoke.

“Delete it right now.”

That was Ham Dae-geun’s way of showing his feelings. It was the utmost consideration he could offer. He couldn’t bring himself to say he wanted to call off the wedding. The beauty and elegance of Chae Eun-bi, along with the distinguished members of her family, were things Dae-geun could never have in this life.

Moreover, if Eun-bi’s biological father became the Chief Justice, he would receive back several times the amount he had invested. Thus, he could not abandon the marriage.

“Do you have any idea how much I’ve invested in you? Huh?”

“…….”

“Delete it right now.”

Dae-geun took the hospital records and the photo of the fetus and left Eun-bi’s house. Eun-bi, overwhelmed by the sudden shock, felt pain in her lower abdomen and sank down to the floor.

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In Eun-yeob’s office.

After meeting Ji-heon, Eun-yeob felt even more bitter. He typed on his PC but found himself pausing several times. He was so irritated by Ji-heon that he could barely stand it. The way Ji-heon looked at him, as if he were nothing more than a bug, continued to boil his blood.

Amid this, Ham Dae-geun came to visit the office. Eun-yeob awkwardly stood up from his seat.

“Director, what brings you here at this time…?”

Dae-geun barged in and immediately grabbed Eun-yeob by the collar.

“You’re trying to push a girl who’s even pregnant onto me?”

With Dae-geun’s face turning red and purple, as if he might strangle someone at any moment, Eun-yeob felt a surge of fear.

“…I think there’s been some misunderstanding, Director.”

“Misunderstanding? I’ve already confirmed everything!”

Dae-geun threw the medical records and the photo of the fetus he had gathered onto the floor of Eun-yeob’s office.

The papers fell unceremoniously to the office floor, landing at Eun-yeob’s feet.

Eun-yeob, shaking, bent down to pick them up. It was a photo of a nine-week-old fetus.

“What? Nine weeks pregnant? What a chilling development.”

His sister had said she was on medication but hadn’t taken any. Perhaps she intended to deceive him into thinking it was his child. Eun-yeob felt nothing but disbelief at his sister’s incredibly reckless behavior.

“No wonder she dragged me into her bed. She was planning to pass off someone else’s child as mine. That’s why everyone seemed so anxious, huh?”

“…….”

“How low do you think of me…?”

“It’s not like that, Director.”

Eun-yeob pleaded with Dae-geun, unable to rise from the floor. If he didn’t hold on to Dae-geun now, the future of his family would be at stake.

“What do you mean it’s not?”

“I’m saying this for the honor of our family!”

“…….”

“Eun-bi is going to have the surgery. She’s just scared right now.”

Eun-yeob slowly started to get up while keeping an eye on Dae-geun.

“Surgery is quite common these days. It’s safe, and it won’t affect future pregnancies at all. You know that, don’t you?”

“…….”

“You have to understand, Director. She’s a poor girl in a difficult situation.”

With tears welling in his eyes, Eun-yeob made his appeal. To anyone watching, he looked like a desperate brother fighting for his sister’s well-being.

Dae-geun’s eyebrows furrowed. He gradually calmed his excited breath and looked at Eun-yeob.

“She was taken advantage of. My sister was taken advantage of.”

“By who…?”

“Who do you think? You know, don’t you? The guy who left my sister like a duck in the Nakdong River and started a new life with another woman.”

Dae-geun’s eyes widened, unable to shake off his doubts, even at Eun-yeob’s desperate expression.

That good-for-nothing brother-in-law type of guy.

Before committing to marriage, Dae-geun had done his background check on Chae Eun-bi. He had been bothered by the fact that she had been in a long-term relationship with Jeong Ji-heon, the second son of the Seoryun Group. Recently, however, there were rumors that they weren’t dating anymore.

Although the unsubstantiated rumors were uncomfortable, Dae-geun ultimately decided to marry Eun-bi because she was simply too beautiful, and her family was impressive.

On the other hand, he thought it was unreasonable that a thirty-year-old woman could have no past at all, but he compromised with reality.

However, pregnancy was a different matter altogether.

Seeing Dae-geun’s expression change as he was completely swayed by his pleas, Eun-yeob felt a glimmer of hope.

Eun-yeob’s eyes sparkled.

This could be an opportunity!

“Jeong Ji-heon. That guy is utterly disgusting.”

A chance to ruin Ji-heon’s life.

Ch135 - A Mother to a Mother

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It was a busy day filled with congratulations coming from all directions. Thanks to the thoughtfulness of her teammates, there weren't many bothersome incidents, but by the time it was quitting time, Jeong-oh felt completely drained.

"I'm home!"

As she opened the front door and greeted everyone, her daughter Ye-na ran over first.

"Mommy!"

"Princess Ye-na!"

With no strength left to lift her, Jeong-oh plopped down on the floor to embrace her daughter.

While the mother and daughter shared a tender reunion, Guk-soon approached.

"Did you eat?"

"I did."

"Why isn't Jeong-seobang coming with you today?"

"Seems like he has a lot to do."

"Oh dear, that sounds tough."

“It was hard for me too.”

As Guk-soon muttered to herself with concern for her husband, Jeong-oh pouted in response. She opened the refrigerator, wondering if there was any refreshing juice.

“Are you going to drink beer?”

“No. I decided not to drink.”

“What’s this about?”

“Do you think I’m someone who just drinks all the time?”

She couldn’t bring herself to say it was because of what had happened with Jeong Ji-heon and instead replied sulkily. Ye-na ran back to her mother, eager to share what had happened that day.

“Mom, today I called Grandpa!”

“Oh really? What did you talk about?”

Since she hadn’t been able to call separately, Jeong-oh felt proud of her daughter for doing such a nice thing and gently touched Ye-na’s cheeks with her palm while smiling.

“I told him I ate all the candy.”

“Oh my, really?”

But Ye-na’s answer quickly changed Jeong-oh’s expression.

“You ate all the candy?”

“Yup.”

“All of that?”

Jeong-oh looked around and headed toward Ye-na's room. There had been a huge jar filled to the brim with candy, but the jars that Ji-gwang had filled were now completely empty—both of them! The child had even scraped up the candy dust that had settled at the bottom.

In just four days, all that candy was gone.

"Did you eat all of this by yourself?"

"I shared some with Grandma, and I gave some to Dobin and Doyun."

"How many did you give Dobin and Doyun?"

Ye-na lowered her head and slowly counted on her little fingers.

This meant she had given away only a few.

Most of it, she had eaten by herself.

"Jeong Ye-na, how many candies did I say you could have in a day? I said just four, remember?"

"But these candies were smaller than the others."

"That doesn't mean you can eat ten times more! No, what am I saying? You must have eaten four hundred!"

Ye-na, realizing her mistake, subtly avoided Jeong-oh's gaze.

"Did you really eat all that candy that Grandpa gave you to enjoy over time? And then you still called him to ask for more?"

But the child had her grievances too.

"Grandpa said I did a good job, so why are you upset?"

"What do you mean, 'good job'?"

"Grandma!"

Ye-na whimpered as she ran over to her grandmother.

When Grandma took her in, the child's bad habit emerged: crying bitterly. She knew that adults often responded to tears, so she intentionally cried even louder.

"Grandma, Mommy made me cry!"

"Did Mommy make you cry? You're the one who's crying, and now you want to blame her?"

"Waaah!" At her mother's scolding, Ye-na's cries grew louder. Guk-soon lifted Ye-na and comforted her, telling her not to cry. Jeong-oh found even that displeasing.

"Why are you picking up such a heavy child like that? Your arms are going to fall off. Put her down."

"No!"

Ye-na clung even tighter to her grandmother's embrace.

"Grandma, I want to sleep with you tonight."

"Don't even think about kicking me with your feet while you sleep! You'll have to sleep by yourself!"

"No!"

The stubborn child wouldn't give in.

Eventually, the headstrong Ye-na spread out a big blanket in Guk-soon's room and fell asleep. Jeong-oh sat nearby, letting out deep sighs.

"Oh, I'm so upset."

"Kids are all like that, what can you do? You were the same way."

“I wasn’t! When my mom told me not to do something, I stopped right away.”

“You only remember those things. You were the same. You two are just alike.”

“No, we’re not! And Mom, do you know how she eats her candy? She crunches it all at once! That’s why she finishes it so quickly. Her teeth are going to rot away.”

“She brushed her teeth well before bed, so it’s fine.”

Guk-soon gently patted the child’s head. With her mother’s hand on the child, Jeong-oh felt as if her mother was comforting her too. Her mother’s gentle and calm nature always brought Jeong-oh a sense of stability.

After a moment of solemnity, Jeong-oh spoke up.

“I’ll take her. You can sleep comfortably, Mom.”

“Just leave her be.”

“……”

“This is all thanks to you, Mom. How wonderful is it that your granddaughter wants to sleep with you like this?”

“……”

“Still, no matter what, I think this is the happiest time for you. Your daughter is married and still living happily with you. What more could you want?”

Truly, Guk-soon was experiencing the happiest moment of her life. It felt like she had no more wishes left; wanting anything more from here on seemed greedy, a feeling of complete happiness.

“My mom also said this was her wish. To live happily with her daughter even after marrying her off.”

“Grandma?”

“Yes. But she passed away too early.”

“……”

“I’m fulfilling that wish on her behalf.”

As Jeong-oh spoke about her grandmother, whom she had never met, she noticed Guk-soon’s eyes glistening. Jeong-oh hugged her knees and tilted her head.

Thinking about the world’s best mother, Mrs. Lee Guk-soon, who seemed to have been a mother since birth, it tugged at her heart to imagine that there must have been a time when she, too, was loved like Ye-na.

“Oh, you must be so tired. Hurry up and go rest.”

The time for reflection wasn’t long. Guk-soon, not wanting to show tears to her daughter, turned her head away and waved her hand dismissively.

After saying goodbye to her mother, Jeong-oh returned to her room and flopped onto the bed, staring blankly at the floor.

Every day, she spread out a blanket on the floor and slept with Ye-na, but today she was lying in a room on the opposite side of the hallway without the child.

How strange. It wasn’t as if the child was protecting her, but somehow she felt lost without Ye-na.

The child had been the one protecting her.

Jeong-oh realized a new truth. She had always thought she was the one protecting her child, but the child was also protecting her. All the overflowing happiness and laughter had come from Ye-na. It was also thanks to Ye-na that the gloomy days hadn’t been frightening.

As she quietly reflected on the happiness Ye-na brought her, she felt that she had scolded the child too harshly today. If she had just given a stern warning in the first place, the child would have been more careful. It was also largely her fault for not saying anything when it was the first gift Ye-na received from her grandfather.

“I should apologize tomorrow.”

Thinking this, she found it a bit amusing. By tomorrow, Ye-na would likely forget that she had been scolded and would come to her like a puppy. Imagining that made Jeong-oh feel that, like her mother, she was currently the happiest.

She considered going to sleep early since Ji-heon seemed to be running late but decided to sit up instead. Though she was tired, she thought it was only right to wait for Ji-heon, knowing he must have had an even tougher day. She also wanted to hear about what happened during his day.

Entering the bathroom, Jeong-oh filled the tub with warm water. This was the first time she had lived in a house with a bathtub, but she hadn’t yet enjoyed its benefits.

Feeling worn out, she decided to soak in the warm water to relieve her fatigue until Ji-heon arrived. As she got into the tub, a shiver ran through her body.

Ah, this is paradise!

The pleasantly warm water felt as if it melted away all her worldly troubles. The noisy incidents at work felt faint and dreamlike.

Ah, life is beautiful.

Forgetting all her worries, Jeong-oh gently closed her eyes. It felt like she could fall asleep just like this. However, the time of mindfulness didn’t last long. Just as she briefly closed her eyes, her phone vibrated. It was Ji-heon.

“Hello?”

[Where are you?]
“I’m at home.”

[What are you doing at home?]
“I’m enjoying the bathtub. The water is warm and nice. You should soak a bit when you get home too. Where are you?”

[I’m almost there.]
“Okay. Come in quietly. Mom is sleeping. Ye-na is also sleeping in Mom’s room.”

[Got it.]

The call ended quickly. Though her break hadn’t been long, she felt a bit relieved of her fatigue and thought she would sleep well.

“I’ll just sit here for three more minutes before getting up.”

Jeong-oh sank deeply into the tub, letting the water rise to her chin.

At that moment, the door opened.

Startled, Jeong-oh’s mouth fell open.

“Gah! Ugh!”

She staggered and ended up gulping down some of the bathwater.

The person who revealed themselves was none other than her husband.

It wasn’t particularly surprising, but she felt a lump form in her throat.

For some reason, her husband was completely naked. His audaciously bare form, covered only by a towel, made her feel as if time had stopped.

Even in the hazy, humid bathroom, his muscular body stood out sharply, making Jeong-oh’s face turn bright red. Just that alone made the bride tense up all over, yet this man casually approached the tub without a care in the world.

Ah, why are you coming in here?

“…Why did you come in?”

“You told me to soak. You.”

Ah, I did say that. Jeong-oh hurriedly regretted her words.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Why? Don’t you want me to?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Let’s share the tub.”

While suggesting they share the tub, he chose not to sit directly in front of her but instead squeezed into the space behind her.

Even though he had just entered the tub, his body felt oddly warm against her back. She could imagine the hard, rippling muscles.

His broad chest completely enveloped her small shoulders. Every little movement caused the water to ripple, making Jeong-oh freeze up even more. It was difficult to breathe, but Ji-heon chuckled as if he found it amusing.

“This is fun.”

“……”

“Our wife gets so tense even while taking a bath.”

Whose fault is this?

“I’ll just wash you gently, so relax a bit.”

“……”

“Just for now.”

J-Just for now?

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Guk-soon lay down to sleep next to her granddaughter on the spacious bed. After living in a bed since the move, settling back on the floor felt surprisingly comfortable in its own way.

As comfortable as it was, Guk-soon quickly fell asleep and met her mother in a dream for the first time in a while. Even knowing it was a dream, Guk-soon felt deeply moved.

“Mom!”

“Is my Guk-soon here?”

In her dream, Guk-soon looked to be around the same age as Jeong-oh. Her mother, too, appeared just as young and beautiful as she did when she passed away.

Though she wished to see an older version of her mother, Guk-soon was just so happy to see her.

“How come you haven’t changed at all?”

“Our daughter has grown just like me.”

At that moment, someone beside her tugged at the hem of her dress. It was a baby Jeong-oh, small like Ye-na. Guk-soon quickly introduced her daughter to her mother.

“Mom, this is my daughter Jeong-oh. She looks just like you, right?”

“She’s pretty just like her mother.”

Guk-soon’s mother lovingly stroked baby Jeong-oh for a long time. The scene was both sad and happy, and Guk-soon felt tears welling up, but she

held them back.

“Jeong-oh.”

“Yes!”

Baby Jeong-oh replied eagerly. Jeong-oh’s mother and Guk-soon’s mother shared a strikingly similar maternal smile.

“You need to listen to your mom and stay healthy. Eat well, okay?”

“Yes!”

“Now, here’s a gift from Grandma.”

Baby Jeong-oh received a large, red, luscious apple from her grandmother. It was so big that she had to hug it with both arms.

Ch136 - You are being deceived.

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A large hand suddenly reached out from the water. The overwhelming presence it occupied felt almost obscene to Jeong-oh. She hurriedly grabbed the hand.

“I’m all washed up. It’s fine.”

Her voice, raised in pitch, echoed in the bathroom. Startled by the sound of her own voice, which seemed louder than usual, Jeong-oh quickly lowered it.

“I was just about to get out.”

“Stay a little longer.”

As Jeong-oh tried to stand, Ji-heon gripped her waist and pulled her back down. Splash! She sank back down, sending droplets of water flying upwards.

Ji-heon had a bizarre knack for exerting strength without any effort. He casually turned Jeong-oh around, and she stumbled, grabbing onto his shoulder for support.

They had merely shifted the stage, yet the situation was becoming just like it had been on the bed. The only difference was that Ji-heon was looking up at her while she was looking down.

Water droplets clung to his face, and his broad shoulders glistened with moisture. Even though he looked clear and clean, his gaze felt oddly murky

and enticing. It seemed as if he were begging for a kiss, or perhaps silently demanding one.

Under the spell of that aura, Jeong-oh's head tilted down. As if he had anticipated her move, Ji-heon smiled and captured her lips. Their lips were the purest and most sacred. As he kissed her, he began to do what hands could do, savoring her breath.

With every movement, the sound of water reverberated through the otherwise silent bathroom. Before long, exhausted, she leaned into him and nestled close. Ji-heon kissed her as he saw fit.

After a while, Jeong-oh quietly asked, "How was today? Were you tired?"

"No. It was amazing."

"……"

"I finally get to say who Jeong-oh's husband is."

She had expected him to be weary from the day, but he looked perfectly fine. In fact, he seemed genuinely happy. The sound of water continued to ripple around them.

Whether to call it a bath or a playful activity was debatable. After an indulgent soak that contradicted the initial intent to cleanse body and mind, Jeong-oh hurriedly stepped out of the bathroom and got dressed.

Feeling anxious about what might happen if she hesitated, she was in a rush.

"Jeong-oh."

In the meantime, Ji-heon also stepped out of the bathroom.

"Hey, honey."

"Yeah? Huh?"

Jeong-oh, fumbling to button her pajamas, responded.

“Come here. I’ll dry your hair.”

Ji-heon said, holding a hairdryer in his hand. Having put on her clothes without drying her hair, her shoulders were now completely wet. With a towel draped over her shoulder, Jeong-oh walked to the vanity and reached out to Ji-heon.

“No, I’ll do it, oppa.”

“I’ll do it for you.”

“Why are you being so scary?”

“Is a husband drying your hair scary?”

“No, it’s just that you’ve never done this before.”

“I’ve always wanted to do it, but there was never time.”

“……”

“If you want, I’ll do it for you every day from now on.”

Jeong-oh couldn’t resist his insistence. Like a docile lamb, she quietly sat down and allowed her husband to take care of her.

Having tensed up due to her husband’s sudden entrance while she was relaxing in warm water, she now felt like she was in paradise as she sat quietly, drying off and enjoying the warm breeze. The moisture in her hair slowly evaporated, leaving her body feeling fresh and dry.

Jeong-oh raised her head and asked, “Should I do it for you too?”

“Sure.”

This time, Jeong-oh took the hairdryer, and Ji-heon sat down in a chair.

The sound of the dryer filled the small space.

Jeong-oh suddenly found herself smiling.

Why are we doing this?

With things we can do for ourselves, why are we being silly and spending time helping each other?

The thought that these foolish moments were the source of happiness kept her smiling.

Ji-heon watched Jeong-oh through the mirror for a moment before turning his body to face her.

“Stop it.”

“Huh?”

Unable to hear him properly over the sound of the dryer, Jeong-oh moved to get up and leave his side. Ji-heon immediately pulled her back by the waist.

Jeong-oh struggled with the dryer still in her hand. He took the dryer from her and turned it off. The hot air that had been scattered around suddenly ceased, leaving the room in silence.

“It’s hot.”

He spoke again. His gaze was equally intense, making his words feel oddly charged. It was unclear whether he meant the air was hot or if he himself was feeling hot.

In an instant, the situation became just like it had in the bathroom. He had her trapped in his embrace, looking up and enjoying her flustered expression.

Things had definitely happened in the bathroom. But thinking about it for just a moment made the answer clear. Ji-heon was not the kind of person

who would be satisfied with that. Perhaps she had already braced herself for what was to come.

He was an opportunist. With Ye-na asleep in her grandmother’s room, it was an unmissable opportunity for Ji-heon.

Seeing Jeong-oh sitting on top of him with a resigned look on her face, Ji-heon smirked.

“Did you think I was going to do this?”

“No, I didn’t!”

Jeong-oh’s face flushed bright red as he exposed her thoughts.

“Relax, it’s true.”

“I said I didn’t!”

She tried to protest, but her voice was quickly drowned out. This time, unlike in the bathroom, he pressed his lips against hers first like a thief. As her hands fumbled for balance, he pulled her in closer.

His large hand traveled up her back. Jeong-oh gripped Ji-heon’s arm tightly, urgency filling her touch. Their murmurs melted into their breaths.

With their lips still touching, the warmth surged between them, and a wave of heat burst in her mouth. Every time this moment happened, it sent shivers down her spine. Her head spun, and all worries about the future felt meaningless; she wanted to pour everything she had into the present.

It was a night where all the many events of the day felt distant and faded away.

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The next morning.

For once, Jeong-oh woke up first. Accustomed to waking up in a landscape filled with her child, she took a moment to catch her breath in surprise.

Ah, I'm married.

The time spent living as Ji-heon's wife was so short that in her dreams, she appeared carefree, only to rush back to her true self with the arrival of morning. The fact that she still had a husband felt so strange and wonderful.

While she had felt a little resentful at night, his sleeping face was as lovable as Ye-na's.

As she gazed at Ji-heon's face absentmindedly, she finally realized that he had given her all the blankets and was sleeping in just his underwear. Jeong-oh got up, lifted the blanket over him, and then let it fall back down as she traced his abdominal muscles.

As the room brightened, the scars on his body became more visible. They were surgical scars from seven years ago. Every time she saw those scars, her heart ached. Even though he always insisted he was fine, Jeong-oh felt a pang of sorrow on her own.

"Why are you touching me so much? It's morning," Ji-heon said in a languid voice as he woke up. Jeong-oh quickly withdrew her hand and asked, "Are you awake?"

Instead of answering her question, Ji-heon cast a glance at her.

"What happened to my clothes? Did you take them off?"

"……"

"Oh, beast."

The words spilled from Ji-heon's mouth. He teased her as if returning a jab from earlier. Jeong-oh was at a loss for words.

"No, you took them off yourself…"

Even so, as soon as Ji-heon got up, Jeong-oh flinched and stepped aside.

When she kept her distance, he would pull her waist closer; when she tried to escape, he would just come right back to sit her down or lay her down again. And when he laid her down, he didn't let her sleep; pretending to be asleep was pointless.

That's why she flinched every time he came near. Seeing her shrink back, Ji-heon, perhaps thinking she was sore, spoke in an exceptionally gentle voice.

"Take the day off work. It's okay to miss one day."

"Right after announcing our marriage, it would look really good if I called in sick," she replied.

"It's fine. I'll handle everything."

As always, he spoke lightly. Thinking that he wasn't making any sense, Jeong-oh left the room first. Ji-heon quickly followed after putting on his clothes.

At the same time, Ye-na, who had also woken up, spotted Ji-heon coming from the other side and ran over.

"Daddy!"

"Did you sleep well, Ye-na?"

Ji-heon scooped Ye-na up in his arms. Jeong-oh raised an eyebrow. Despite being a man who made his living off the same things as her, she couldn't understand how he was so full of energy alone.

"Daddy, why did you come home late yesterday?"

"Daddy was busy with work, so I came home late. I'm sorry."

Ji-heon said this while still holding Ye-na in his arms, greeting Guk-soon as well.

“Good morning, Mother. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. Did you sleep well, Ye-na’s dad?”

“Yes.”

Ji-heon’s overly polite morning greeting made Jeong-oh’s eyebrows raise again.

Everyone. You’re all being fooled. That man…

The things Jeong-oh could not reveal to her family about how lewd, persistent, and mischievous he was made her sigh as she turned away.

Guk-soon’s gaze followed Jeong-oh as she walked away for a long while.

Before breakfast, Jeong-oh and Ye-na made up. In truth, there wasn’t much to reconcile. Forgetting about yesterday overnight, Ye-na easily clung to Jeong-oh and insisted on doing a ballerina hairstyle today.

After breakfast, helping Ye-na get ready for school, the morning was busier than ever, but Jeong-oh felt happier than usual. Finally, starting today, she could go to work with Ji-heon. She was relieved to be done with the trouble of sneaking off a few blocks from the office building.

“Mom, I’m off!”

Jeong-oh’s voice was as bright as her mood when she said her goodbye. Guk-soon called her back.

“Lee Jeong-oh.”

“Yes?”

“Wear these. Those look uncomfortable.”

Guk-soon picked up a pair of sneakers from the corner of the entrance and set them in front of Jeong-oh. Jeong-oh shook her head.

“No, these shoes match the fit of these pants.”

“These are pretty too. Wear these.”

“What kind of sneakers are appropriate for the office?”

“They said in advertising companies you can wear whatever you want. Wear something comfortable.”

“I don’t want to.”

As Jeong-oh grumbled, Ji-heon chimed in.

“Lee Jeong-oh, you should listen to your mother.”

“Right! Don’t just tell Ye-na what to do; you should listen to your mom too!”

Ye-na joyfully chimed in from the side.

In the end, with the family’s persistence, Jeong-oh took off the heels she was wearing and put on the sneakers. With her height lowered to match the shoes, she sulked.

“I feel shorter now.”

“You look cuter and it’s better,” Ji-heon said as he easily draped his arm over Jeong-oh’s shoulder.

“Just don’t trip and watch where you’re going,” Guk-soon urged, still worried even after switching her shoes.

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Ji-heon answered on Jeong-oh’s behalf. Guk-soon smiled, seeing Ji-heon’s reliability. Ji-heon smiled back at Guk-soon, but just then, his phone vibrated. It was a text message from Seung-kyu.

– Did you see this?

Beneath Seung-kyu’s short message was a link to an internet address. Clicking on the link brought up a post. Ji-heon’s expression soured as he read the post’s title.

“‘Chairman Jeong Jae-gwang of the Seonryeon Group’s second son, Jeong Ji-heon’s bullying’”

As he read the elaborate, fabricated story, Ji-heon felt his mood darken. But since it wasn’t true, he thought he could quickly handle it.

However, the uproar was just the beginning of his troubles.

Ch137 - The Truth of the Rumor

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Returning home late at night, Jae-gwang was shocked the next morning. His house was filled with flower gifts. While he was at work, Young-mi had quietly prepared a list of flowers without ever contacting him.

Young-mi must have received messages from various people too. Being someone who wouldn’t speak ill of his child, she must have silently suffered each time she received congratulations, unable to vent her frustrations.

Her heart couldn’t be at ease.

Still, he thought that her heart was gradually changing, even if just a little.

“Check out the photos we took when the kids came over for the weekend,” he said cautiously, placing the tablet he was holding next to Young-mi. A large picture of Yena’s smiling face appeared on the screen. Young-mi glanced at it for a moment but did not pick up the tablet.

“Yena called me yesterday. She said she finished all the candy and wants more made,” he continued.

“……”

“I hope you can be there next time Yena visits.”

Jae-gwang expressed his wish to Young-mi. Her hands, which had been busy tidying up, paused for a moment before resuming their work.

“There’s no reason to see each other again now.”

“If I apologize, she will accept it. You know that they’re not the type to ignore their parents,” he persuaded, but Young-mi kept her mouth tightly shut. Jae-gwang gently rubbed her shoulder and then stood up.

“I’ll head to work now. I’ll leave the photos here.”

“I don’t need them.”

“Just take a look anyway.”

Everyone in the family was stubborn, so it would take a long time to change their minds. Jae-gwang decided not to push any further.

As he quietly prepared to leave the house, he received a call from his secretary.

“Have you already arrived at work? I was just about to leave.”

“[Chairman, you need to see this article right away.]” The secretary’s voice was urgent as she relayed the news. Jae-gwang read the news article that the secretary had sent him. Articles about Seoyeon Group were pouring in.

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「 Abuse of Power by Seoyeon Group’s Owner Family 」

「 Larvae Found in New Dumplings from Seoyeon Foods 」

「 Poor Hygiene at Seoyeon Foods Dumpling Factory. Confessions from Former Employees 」

「 Illegal Bidding by Seoyeon Construction’s Affiliates. Suspicions of a Paper Company 」

「 Seoyeon Group’s Second Generation, Jeong Ji-tae and Jeong Ji-heon’s Debauchery, Corruption Allegations 」

「Seoyeon Foods CEO Jeong Ji-tae, Favoring Brother’s Company Max Planning with Contracts」

It was as if they had all planned to strike at once, with a series of new articles emerging about Seoyeon Group.

The ordinary exposés included product photos from Seoyeon Foods and videos from the dumpling factory. The source was unknown, and the authenticity was questionable, but it was hard to simply deny the situation.

Ji-heon was also summoned to the company headquarters. The office was inundated with calls from reporters, and a client company informed them that they would be excluding Max Planning from their competitive presentation. It was needless to say that the stock prices of all affiliates of Seoyeon Group had plummeted.

Due to the aftermath of the wedding announcement the previous day, Jeong-oh was receiving unexpected attention as well. Somehow, reporters had found out and called his internal office line.

As a result, Jeong-oh left work early and, after a long time, met Jin-seo in front of Yena’s go academy and accompanied her to her obstetrics appointment.

For Jin-seo, the hot topic of the day was also Seoyeon Group. She exclaimed that she had never seen anything like it in her life.

“This can’t be just a coincidence. Someone must be behind this, orchestrating it.”

Jin-seo seemed convinced that someone had orchestrated this plan. Jeong-oh also found himself deep in thought.

If this truly was someone’s scheme, who could it possibly be? Could it be Remi-Remi?

After being humiliated by Ji-heon on Monday and subsequently ousted, Remi-Remi was said to be facing disciplinary action at Dawon Liquor as

well. This was due to Ji-heon sending a video file to an executive at Dawon.

After reviewing the video, Dawon Liquor sincerely apologized to Max Planning and promised not to send anyone like Remi-Remi in the future. While this was fortunate for Max Planning, Remi-Remi might be sharpening her knives somewhere.

However, Jeong-oh quickly shook his head. It seemed too large a scale for Remi-Remi to have orchestrated alone.

Jin-seo spoke in a low voice, “This seems like a huge conspiracy. What if it was planned by Chae Eun-byul? She might harbor malice toward Ji-heon and you, Jeong-oh, especially after your marriage announcement.”

Jeong-oh nodded at Jin-seo’s opinion but couldn’t conclude easily. With his father facing a confirmation hearing for the Chief Justice position, Chae Eun-byul would likely want to keep a low profile. Being a rather calculated person, she wouldn’t want to create a mess that could jeopardize her own plans.

As they discussed various topics, they soon arrived at Jin-seo’s obstetrics office. Since they were going to hear the results of her prenatal tests, it didn’t take long. Jin-seo had significant anemia and needed to take iron supplements prescribed by her doctor.

“Aren’t you going to get a prenatal checkup, Jeong-oh?” she asked.

“Prenatal checkup?”

“Yes. You’re thinking of having a second child, right?”

At Jin-seo’s question, Jeong-oh nodded slightly.

“It’s fine to get tested after you’re pregnant, but it’s better to do it beforehand. You can check for hepatitis antibodies, and if you don’t have them, you can get the vaccine early.”

“……”

“The tests are simple. They don’t take much time.”

“Oh, then should I go ahead and get tested?”

Encouraged by Jin-seo, Jeong-oh decided to get the prenatal tests. Just as Jin-seo said, the testing time was short.

After completing the tests, the hospital even provided folic acid as a keepsake. The container of folic acid rattled with every step he took.

When he was pregnant with Yena, he hadn’t been able to start taking supplements early. That regret still lingered when he thought of Yena. Jeong-oh gazed at the folic acid container and then spoke up.

“But I’m a bit worried. Even if I were to have a baby now, there would be a big age gap with Yena.”

“We can raise our third child together,” Jin-seo said, as if there were no need for concern at all. In fact, just the thought of having a child around the same time as Jeong-oh made her feel reassured and happy. Imagining that future, Jin-seo recalled what had happened over the past weekend and spoke again.

“It seems like we have quite a connection. I saw a photo of Dobin when he was little not too long ago, and guess what…”

But before she could finish her story, Jeong-oh suddenly disappeared from her sight. He had sprinted ahead.

In the middle of the road, someone had collapsed. Jeong-oh rushed to the fallen person and shouted,

“Chae Eun-bi! Eun-bi!”

Chae Eun-bi?

At Jeong-oh’s shout, Jin-seo was startled and rushed over. The person lying on the ground was none other than Chae Eun-bi. With her pale face, Eun-bi

had lost consciousness. Jeong-oh checked her breathing and kept calling her name before finally looking up.

“We need to take her to the hospital.”

“I’ll go pick up the kids. You go quickly,” Jin-seo said, hailing a taxi. With the help of the taxi driver, Jeong-oh assisted Eun-bi into the cab and they headed to the hospital.

Why did she collapse? What could have happened to her? Even in her unconscious state, Eun-bi had her hand protectively resting on her abdomen. A strange feeling caused Jeong-oh’s heart to ache.

Once they arrived at the hospital, Eun-bi was immediately placed on a stretcher and taken to the emergency room. Despite her gaunt frame, her lower abdomen looked somewhat swollen. Jeong-oh informed the medical staff about Eun-bi’s condition and added the possibility he was concerned about.

“Please check for any injection medications. She might be pregnant.”

“Are you a family member of the patient?”

“No, I’m a friend.”

“Could you contact the guardian, please?”

Jeong-oh felt awkward. Eun-bi’s phone was locked and, for some reason, set to airplane mode.

He hesitated to call Eun-byul for her contact information, fearing it might lead to further trouble. But he also didn’t want to call Ji-heon and ask for Eun-bi’s mother’s contact number, knowing he would likely get scolded.

Unable to do anything, Jeong-oh stayed by Eun-bi’s side. The doctor had just left, saying she would probably wake up soon if there were no major issues.

However, Eun-bi remained unconscious for quite a while. As it neared 7 PM, he received a call from Guk-soon. Jeong-oh stepped out of the emergency room to answer.

“Hello?”

[Why aren’t you here? Did you go to Dobin’s house?]
“No, Mom. I’m at the hospital because someone I know collapsed.”

[Who?]
“Chae Eun-bi.”

[……You’re at the hospital because Chae Eun-bi collapsed? Isn’t there anyone else with you?]
“No, there’s no one else. …She collapsed right in front of me; I couldn’t do anything.”

Jeong-oh’s awkward tone made his mother sigh on the other end of the line.

“Mom, don’t worry. Yena is playing at Dobin’s house for the first time in a while, so you can go pick her up, or Ji-heon can bring her back later.”

[Okay, I understand. You take care of yourself, too.]
Understanding why his mom was worried, Jeong-oh forced a smile.

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Eun-bi woke up in the emergency room, surrounded by curtains.

“Ugh!”

Startled by the eerie scene, Eun-bi quickly sat up and touched her abdomen. She was anxious, unsure whether the baby that had been growing inside her was still there or had disappeared.

In the afternoon, Eun-yeob came directly to her house and took Eun-bi to the hospital. Eun-yeob had already completed all the necessary procedures.

Eun-yeob boldly demanded that the doctor perform a surgery, stating that “legally, the continuation of the pregnancy was endangering the mother’s health.” After receiving the doctor’s confirmation, Eun-yeob left with a satisfied expression, and Eun-bi immediately began preparing for surgery.

However, as time went on, she began to feel that this wasn’t right.

Eun-bi hurriedly fled the hospital in a panic. She thought she might have lost consciousness somewhere near the hospital.

What had happened after that? How had she gotten here?

Was the baby… okay?

As she looked around, the curtains were pulled back and someone entered. It was Jeong-oh. Startled, Eun-bi’s eyes widened.

“Are you okay?”

“……”

“I found you collapsed on the street, so I brought you here.”

“Why are you here? Get lost.”

When Jeong-oh didn’t move, Eun-bi thought she needed to leave. She reached for the IV needle to remove it, but Jeong-oh stopped her.

“Don’t. You need to finish the IV.”

“How could I get an IV in front of you? Who knows what’s in that solution?”

“What are you talking about? What kind of nonsense is that?”

“……”

“This is just a nutrient solution. …It’s safe for the fetus, too…”

Jeong-oh carefully mentioned the baby.

Feeling like Jeong-oh already knew all about her condition made Eun-bi feel miserable. Yet strangely, at the same time, a sense of relief washed over her. She felt like she might burst into tears.

It was horrifying that the only person acknowledging her baby was someone she hated more than anyone else in the world, but it also provided her with an inexplicable comfort.

“Think about your own health. You know your condition better than anyone.”

Jeong-oh offered her some sound advice while holding out Eun-bi’s phone.

“Contact your mother. I’ll leave once she arrives.”

“No. I’ll take care of it, so just go.”

“Okay, then I’ll just wait to see you contact her.”

Eun-bi glared at Jeong-oh with determination.

Even so, Jeong-oh didn’t back down. He had just checked on Eun-bi’s condition. It was true that she was pregnant, and that made him even more reluctant to leave her alone. He felt that something bad would happen if he did.

“Or at least give me the contact information of a close friend. I’ll reach out for you.”

“……”

“Chae Eun-bi, this isn’t the time to be stubborn.”

“Stop pretending to be nice and get lost! Do you have any idea what I’ve done because of you guys…”

Eun-bi started to speak but suddenly shut her mouth in surprise. Jeong-oh's eyes widened.

Her heart raced. It felt like Eun-bi was holding onto some secret.

"……What?"

"Just go."

"What have you done?"

"……"

"What kind of secret are you hiding?"

Jeong-oh watched as Eun-bi's lips quickly dried up.

What on earth had Chae Eun-bi done? Was it related to the online attacks happening with Seoyeon Group? Or perhaps to Eun-yeob?

Or maybe to our Ye-na?

"Just tell me. If it's something I can help with, I will."

"Don't pretend to be friendly just because you have dirt on me. It's disgusting."

Eun-bi seemed to regain some strength, even giving a sardonic smirk as she shot back with her mocking question.

"If the baby inside me is Jeong Ji-heon's, would you still act like this?"

"Of course not. It would be more convincing to say you're experiencing a phantom pregnancy."

But Jeong-oh wasn't about to fall for that kind of provocation.

"I'll ask you again. Chae Eun-bi, what do you know?"

Jeong-oh repeated the question with a more serious tone.

Eun-bi’s heart tightened.

Ch138 - The Fool Who Only Knows You

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There are some people whose mere presence makes you dislike them.

Eun-bi had actually disliked Jeong-oh from the moment she first saw her.

They were in the same class, sharing similar heights, builds, and entrance exam scores.

“I think Jeong-oh and Eun-bi are the prettiest in our class.”

Within the frame created by her friends, Eun-bi was often compared to Jeong-oh.

“Come on, Jeong-oh is way prettier than I am.”

Disappointed by her friends who rated her on the same level as Jeong-oh, Eun-bi forced a smile and played humble. Shouldn’t they say, “No, you’re prettier”? But her friends stayed silent, as if that were the right thing to do.

Then one day, Eun-bi saw Jeong-oh chatting happily with a lady in the cafeteria.

“Jeong-oh gets along well with the cafeteria lady, huh?”

“That’s her mom. Didn’t you know?”

Eun-bi was taken aback by her friend’s reply.

How could she be so cheerful when her mom worked in the cafeteria? Wasn’t she ashamed?

“They say Jeong-oh lives with her mom. I guess she doesn’t have a dad.”

“……”

“But she’s really nice. I thought Jeong-oh was a rich kid like you.”

Eun-bi found her friend’s comments irritating but remained silent.

After that, Eun-bi started paying more attention to Jeong-oh.

Jeong-oh never seemed to be intimidated. When she encountered her mom, she would introduce her to her friends with a bright smile, even when other kids asked about her.

The fact that she came from a desperately poor family, that she was born without a father, that her mom worked in the cafeteria kitchen—none of these truths could bring Jeong-oh down.

A child who never felt small. A child who navigated this intense school life so smoothly. Eun-bi struggled to maintain her friendships, while Jeong-oh seemed to create them effortlessly.

In truth, she disliked that Jeong-oh walked around smiling. She simply hated it.

Thus, throughout their school years, Jeong-oh remained a thorn in her side.

Eun-bi thought they would never cross paths again, but a decade later, they met again at work. This time, they were in neighboring teams, both copywriters.

Jeong-oh was the same now as she had been ten years ago. She radiated the aura of someone who had been loved and cherished, and because of that, she received even more love. Despite becoming a single mother in the meantime, she showed no signs of feeling small. This grated on Eun-bi’s nerves and, on some level, made her anxious.

For me to hate you, you should be a worse person.

But since that wasn’t the case, she felt unjustly wronged, and unable to resolve that feeling only added to her suffering.

Continuously struggling within that turmoil, the person who always ended up unhappy and unable to find satisfaction was herself.

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“Tell me. You need to tell me so I can help you.”

Jeong-oh’s assertive voice made Eun-bi’s eyes waver.

How can you be so serious about my life? How can you be so earnest as if you can truly help me?

What have I done to you? Don’t you dislike me at all?

Eun-bi genuinely wanted to ask these questions but masked her feelings with a scoff.

“Are you crazy? What would I trust you with to share my story?”

Eventually, Jeong-oh couldn’t press further and turned her back. Eun-bi reached out her hand towards the departing Jeong-oh, then let it drop. After realizing that Jeong-oh was not leaving her but heading to the restroom, she unconsciously let out a sigh of relief.

After being moved from the emergency room to a regular ward, Eun-bi pondered how to survive.

Everyone must be waiting for news that she had successfully undergone surgery. She couldn’t ignore the pressure from Daekun. If she upset him, it could spill over to her dad as well.

She had to avoid causing any trouble until her dad safely became the Chief Justice. The family needed Daekun. However, she couldn’t marry him.

So, all she had to do was hold out for a few days. Just until her dad's confirmation hearing was over.

While she was lost in thought, she heard voices coming from outside her hospital room.

"Hey? Mom, why did you come all the way here?"

"I came because I was worried."

Eun-bi quickly deduced the identity of the person speaking with Jeong-oh. It was Jeong-oh's mom, Mrs. Lee Guk-soon, who had also come to the hospital.

"What's there to worry about a grown daughter?"

"Is your friend okay?"

"Yeah, she seems fine."

"You both haven't eaten dinner, have you? Take this in and eat."

Eun-bi was taken aback. It seemed Mrs. Lee had brought a packed lunch.

"What about you, Mom?"

"I just grabbed something quick."

"Let me take it. I'll go buy some water. I'll be right back."

"Okay."

"Oh, by the way, Mom, you must have some foresight. I had to run because of Cha Eun-bi collapsing, but since I wore comfortable shoes, I didn't trip."

"See? Just don't run around too much. Always be careful."

The conversation ended as the door opened.

Eun-bi immediately lay down on the bed, closed her eyes, and pretended to be asleep. Guk-soon cautiously approached her side, placing the tray on the bed and setting down the food she had brought. Wondering what kind of nonsense this was in someone else's hospital room, Eun-bi finally opened her eyes.

Guk-soon noticed and spoke up.

"Are you awake? You need to eat dinner."

"Did you come to check if I might harm Jeong-oh or something?"

Eun-bi shot back petulantly. Despite Eun-bi's sarcasm, Guk-soon smiled as if acknowledging it, half making excuses.

"I just… wanted to see if you were eating properly."

"……"

"I can't help it. I only have one daughter, so I worry. I'm sorry."

The truth was that Guk-soon had become so attentive to her daughter because of Eun-bi. Thirteen years ago, Guk-soon lost her job in Seoul because of something related to Eun-bi and ended up moving to Gunsan. The feelings of a mother leaving her studying daughter behind to make money are indescribable.

While she was proud of her daughter, who was managing well on her own, she also fretted over little things.

One day, Eun-bi had been downcast because she lost points for forgetting to bring her performance assessment assignment. That day, Guk-soon felt a pain in her heart. She thought to herself that she could have just brought it to her, and if she had only lived in Seoul, her daughter wouldn't have lost points. She kept blaming herself.

On rainy days and snowy days, she worried about whether her daughter had taken an umbrella, whether she got wet, and whether she was sick.

It seemed that worrying had become a habit. Even after they began living together, Guk-soon would become restless whenever something happened to Eun-bi. Perhaps by rushing to her now, she was trying to make up for the things she hadn't been able to provide as a mother back then.

Though she had once inwardly resented Eun-bi for the rift between them, seeing her now lying there in pain made her feel nothing but pity.

"You need to eat well when you're living alone. Make sure you take care of your meals."

Guk-soon spread out the lunchbox and then left the hospital room immediately.

Eun-bi bit her lower lip in frustration.

Her stomach had been churning, but seeing the lunchbox, she absurdly felt her appetite returning. She clenched her fist, vowing that she absolutely wouldn't eat. Strangely, tears began to fall onto her clenched fist.

She realized one painful truth.

I will never be able to surpass Lee Jeong-oh.

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Jin-seo came home with Ye-na after a long time, and it was needless to say that Do-bin's energy was even higher.

He was running around, laughing so much that Jin-seo reminisced and nagged him.

"Park Do-bin, didn't you say you'd read books with Ye-na if you invited her over?"

"Yeah! Got it!"

Do-bin shouted as he picked up a children's proverb book that was carelessly lying in the living room, flipped through a few pages, and then

rushed into the chaotic kitchen.

“Mom, is it bean rice again today?”

“Yep. Why?”

“Then can I just have one bean?”

Do-bin held out a bowl. Jin-seo opened the rice cooker and placed a few beans in the bowl, asking, “What do you need the beans for?”

“Just one is fine. I have to split it in half. You have to share even one bean, right?”

It seemed he had found a proverb in the book. Jin-seo scolded Do-bin.

“How can you split that? Don’t even think about sharing something like that. You’ll hurt your hand.”

“But the book says? ‘You have to share even one bean.’”

“That’s just a saying.”

“Then if I want to share even one bean, it means I’ll hurt my hand. Isn’t that right?”

Hearing Do-bin’s retort, Ye-na approached and giggled. She flipped through a page of the book next to Do-bin and asked Jin-seo, “Auntie, what does ‘baekji-jang’ mean?”

“It means a plain sheet of paper.”

Do-bin, after reading the book, asked, “Mom, what does ‘matdeulmyun’ mean?”

“It means to lift an object from both sides.”

As soon as Jin-seo answered, Do-bin and Ye-na disappeared into the adjoining room. A moment later, the two kids re-emerged, waddling as they

genuinely tried to lift a single sheet of paper together. Ultimately, the flimsy paper tore.

“Mom, this is weird. A ‘baekji-jang’ tears when you try to lift it together, right? It’s better to lift it alone!”

…Do-bin should be getting smarter by following Ye-na, but it seemed like Ye-na was getting foolish by following Do-bin.

Do-bin turned another page in the book and tilted his head.

“Mom, and this is weird too. How can you knock on a stone bridge before crossing it? You’d have to get out of the car to knock, and then you’d get into an accident!”

“…….”

“Knocking on a stone bridge before crossing it would cause an accident. That’s the right saying, right?”

“…….”

“Mom. Who made proverbs?”

“People from long ago.”

“People from long ago were really not smart. Right, Ye-na?”

“Yeah. We’re smarter!”

Ye-na, who had become absorbed in Do-bin’s conversation, said cheerfully. Jin-seo felt a strange sense of guilt towards Ye-na.

“Ye-na.”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“Just… I’m sorry.”

I’m sorry that my Do-bin is foolish.

I’m sorry he’s a fool who knows nothing but you.

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The situation that started in the morning was growing increasingly out of control. Soon, there were rising claims online calling for a boycott of Seoyeon Foods.

There were many strange points. It was suspicious that incidents had suddenly erupted simultaneously after Ji-heon’s marriage announcement, and it was unclear why they couldn’t reach the reporters who initially wrote the news articles.

It was also suspicious that the call for a boycott was spreading through comments from overseas IPs. The identity and whereabouts of the person claiming to expose the sanitary conditions of Seoyeon Foods’ factory, as well as former employees of the factory, were unknown.

It could be a large group of people, but as time passed, Ji-heon began to think that it might be orchestrated by a single person or a similar group.

However, he was not sure if it was Chae Eun-yeop. Chae Eun-yeop was also in a critical situation and would have to keep a low profile.

“There seems to be a flow. It feels like someone is piling up various incidents and triggering them one by one to observe the reactions,” Ji-heon suggested.

His older brother, Ji-tae, nodded, indicating that he felt the same suspicion. “It could be the work of a rival company or a personal grudge. I’ll look into it as well, so you should check it out too. Someone with money, time, and the ability to mobilize people might be behind this.”

“Yeah. I’m going to head home for now. I didn’t get to see my daughter’s face last night.”

Upon hearing Ji-heon’s announcement that he was going home amidst the serious situation, Ji-tae blinked and chuckled, as if he couldn’t stop him.

After receiving a message that Jeong-o and Guk-soon had not returned home yet, Ji-heon went to pick up Ye-na from Do-bin’s house.

Ye-na hadn’t finished her meal yet, so Ji-heon waited for her while playing a game of marbles with Do-bin. Suddenly, he found Do-bin, who was concentrating hard on the game, adorable and asked him, “What do you want to be when you grow up, Do-bin?”

“I want to be Ye-na’s husband.”

It was a question without any ulterior motives, but for some reason, Ji-heon’s heart ached at Do-bin’s unwavering answer.

“Your dream is to be Ye-na’s husband?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you want to be anything else?”

“No.”

“You don’t have to think of anything else right now, but don’t you think you should have other dreams someday?”

“My mom says the most important thing in the world is love.”

“…….”

“So, Do-bin’s dream is to be Ye-na’s husband.”

Truly, he must be the ultimate romantic.

In the past, I was quite displeased with this, and even now, it still stings a little, but as Jeong-o said, it was comforting to know there is someone who loves my child besides me. My heart was softening a bit.

The most important thing in the world is love…

As I repeated Do-bin's words in my mind, Ji-heon's eyes suddenly lit up.

Of course! How could I have missed that thought?

A person with a lot of money and plenty of time. Someone who could harbor ill intentions toward me.

Someone who could go crazy over a woman.

A person in love.

Ji-heon recalled something he had overheard from an employee in the production team a few days ago: Cha Eun-bi, who had left the company in tears, had quickly gotten engaged to someone.

Who was that again? It had an unusual surname…

Ji-heon quickly took out his phone and started searching. His fingers paused at the search bar when he found the name.

Ham Dae-geun.

He was exactly the person Ji-heon and Ji-tae had predicted.

Ch139 - I Will Win It All

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After dropping Ye-na off at her home, Ji-heon returned to the headquarters of Saerun Group and met Ji-tae.

“The information about Max Planning isn’t something ordinary reporters could easily find. But a businessman running a company of considerable size would have access to this information. This is likely someone who has attempted to do business with us at some point,” Ji-heon explained, organizing the information he had gathered over the past few hours, revealing meaningful clues.

“The numerical data mentioned in the article is from around this time last year. It was when Daegun Resources was deliberating whether to advertise and was testing the waters with Max Planning,” he continued.

Ji-tae nodded in agreement. “Hearing that, it seems the information regarding the construction company is similar. The numerical data used was from when Saerun Construction and Daegun Resources were in contact.”

“It looks like they were preparing to attack from various angles, but if you look closely, it’s not very well thought out. It’s a plot that was hastily prepared in a short time,” Ji-heon assessed.

His opinion seemed plausible, but he couldn’t conclude with certainty.

“We still need to approach this with various possibilities in mind. Your hypothesis might be correct, but there’s also a good chance that it isn’t,” Ji-tae replied.

“What if we make it more newsworthy to attract people’s interest? That way, he might get even more excited and act recklessly. If the stakes are raised, he’ll inevitably get caught,” Ji-heon suggested.

Both Ji-heon and Ji-tae were bold and proactive individuals, so their ideas aligned well. This was the first time the two had collaborated so harmoniously.

“The day before everything exploded, Cha Eun-yeob came to see me. She asked me to withdraw the lawsuit, but I refused. It’s possible she took it out on me. Because she couldn’t get directly involved due to her father’s confirmation hearing, she might have provoked Ham Dae-geun to act as the ringleader,” Ji-heon speculated.

Though it was just a hypothesis, Ji-tae quickly agreed. Although he had never met Ham Dae-geun directly, he knew his reputation through rumors. He was known to be easygoing most of the time, but once provoked, he could go completely berserk.

“I heard that Cha Eun-bi was obsessed with you, and it seems that was true. She turned someone into a complete embodiment of jealousy,” Ji-tae remarked.

“I didn’t have any involvement with Cha Eun-bi,” Ji-heon replied, frowning as Ji-tae teased him.

“Be careful. If Jeong-o hears this, he’ll be displeased too,” Ji-tae warned.

“Even in the midst of all this, are you still afraid of your sister-in-law?” Ji-heon retorted.

“You’ll understand my feelings once you get married,” Ji-tae responded.

Ji-heon dismissed the banter and steeled his resolve. “The confirmation hearing for Judge Cha Seo-bok will be held next Wednesday. We need to wrap this up before then.”

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In response to the flood of rumors, Saerun Group decided to publicly disclose the facilities and sanitation processes of its food factory. They also issued an official statement, declaring their intention to cooperate fully with any future investigations.

Additionally, within the organization, they sought to sway journalists, collected and analyzed information from online forums, and hired professional hackers to track those spreading the rumors.

As they organized the verifiable defamations, rumors about the personal lives of the Saerun Group's owner family grew the loudest, due to their sensational nature. Ji-heon fought against the rumors all night and returned home only on Sunday morning.

Jeong-o, Ye-na, and Guk-soon were waiting at the entrance to greet Ji-heon.

"Oh dear… Our son-in-law has been working so hard. Are you feeling better now?" Jeong-o asked.

"Not yet. I just came to change and wash up. I have to go back out," Ji-heon replied.

Upon hearing Ji-heon's response, Jeong-o turned away with a glum expression. Ji-heon then asked Guk-soon, "Is Jeong-o sick?"

"She's just feeling wronged," Guk-soon replied.

It was then that Guk-soon explained to Ji-heon what had happened on Friday. Jeong-o had found Eun-bi collapsed near the obstetrics and gynecology clinic and had taken her to the emergency room, sitting vigil for several hours like a guardian.

Upon hearing the story, Ji-heon grew worried that Jeong-o had been harmed, but Guk-soon laughed as if it were nothing.

"She brought Cha Eun-bi over and acted all saintly, and now she's getting upset," Guk-soon remarked.

The night before, Jeong-o had told Ji-heon that the Eun-bi siblings might be involved in all the defamation against Saerun Group. Since then, she had been unable to sleep, feeling wronged.

“If I had received that information sooner, I would have treated Cha Eun-bi even more harshly. I would have confronted her aggressively,” Jeong-o lamented.

Ji-heon approached Jeong-o, who was curled up on the sofa, expressing her frustrations. “I had no idea it was related to Cha Eun-bi…”

Ji-heon sat next to her and gently brushed Jeong-o’s hair away from her face.

“If I had known, I wouldn’t have offered any kindness…”

“Even if you had known, you probably would have still helped, wouldn’t you?” Jeong-o shot back, standing up abruptly.

“No way! What do you think of me?”

“Are you really saying that?”

“Of course! I’m a person too! Argh! This is so frustrating!” she yelled.

“It’s okay. It happens,” Ji-heon reassured her.

“Enough! I don’t need your sympathy,” she replied.

Despite her despair over something irreversible and unfixable, she was still endearing to him.

After a moment of expressing her grievances, Jeong-o quietly said, “I’m sorry. I wasn’t able to be of any help.”

“It’s fine. You don’t have to worry,” Ji-heon reassured her.

“…”

“I will win it all,” Ji-heon confidently responded.

Now, the confirmation hearing for Cha Seo-bok was just three days away.

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As time passed, it was now Wednesday morning.

The internet news boards, which had been flooded with stories about the Saerun Group, suddenly saw a bright new headline. It was the day of the confirmation hearing for Supreme Court Justice Cha Seo-bok’s appointment as Chief Justice.

At 10 a.m., journalists from various outlets gathered at the National Assembly. Before the hearing began, the chairman of the Special Committee on Personnel Hearings announced that today’s hearing would be broadcast live by over ten networks.

“I hereby bring forth the confirmation hearing for the appointment of Chief Justice candidate Cha Seo-bok,” the chairman stated.

He then introduced Cha Seo-bok’s background in detail, and after that, Cha Seo-bok stood up and raised his right hand, solemnly taking the oath.

“I swear that I will speak honestly and without concealment or exaggeration, according to my conscience as a public office candidate.”

Having experienced a Supreme Court Justice confirmation hearing several years prior, Cha Seo-bok was not particularly nervous.

“Now we will hear the opening remarks from the Chief Justice candidate,” the chairman guided.

Cha Seo-bok approached the podium, exuding a dignified and austere demeanor as he began to speak.

“As a servant of the esteemed citizens, the past thirty years of my life as a legal professional has been a time of constant reflection, asking myself whether everyone can find happiness before the law, based on the principles

of integrity and justice. It has often been insufficient to merely study to ensure that the law does not get hurt and that the citizens remain unscathed. I wanted to create a court that understands the sorrows of the wronged and offers them comfort through our words.”

Cha Eun-yeob felt tears welling up at her father’s touching words.

How much effort had gone into preparing for this day!

Eun-yeob had thoroughly analyzed the dispositions of all 13 members of the special personnel committee. She had chosen two relatively easy-going members of the National Assembly to lead today’s hearing.

The script had already been prepared, and her father had memorized it perfectly. Everything was going according to the plan. It was an emotional moment.

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No one is without their faults. This was a belief that Ham Dae-geun held firmly.

Everyone has weaknesses, and if you hold onto those weaknesses, they cannot breathe. This was how Ham Dae-geun had reached his current position. By holding the lifelines of the weak and applying pressure from all sides, they soon wept blood, begging for their lives.

“This time, I fought against a major corporation and was more than halfway successful. I’ve made them unable to move. They’ll soon face a series of search warrants and be investigated by the prosecution,” he declared.

Let them taste a bit of their own medicine.

He had so many exciting things happening in the world that he had forgotten that his future father-in-law’s confirmation hearing was taking place at 10 a.m. today.

Dae-geun turned on the live broadcast of the hearing but quickly turned it off. He figured the topics discussed would be predictable and would only

give him a headache, so he had no desire to listen intently. It was boring.

Instead, he decided to focus on what he could do. He would pressure the contractors to increase the pressure on Saerun Group. The task of hamstringing a group under the cover of anonymity was both exciting and gratifying.

At the age of forty, he found joy in playing with toys. With renewed determination, he thought he should stop by the contractor's office and encourage the representative just a bit more. He hoped to create an even more thrilling incident.

As he parked in the contractor's lot and walked into the building, Dae-geun dialed the representative's phone number. He had managed to reach them easily last night, but today they didn't answer, seemingly too busy. Just then, a man approached him and spoke.

"Are you Ham Dae-geun?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Police. Ham Dae-geun, I am placing you under arrest for obstruction of business."

Two officers, showing their badges, informed Dae-geun of his rights under the Miranda rule as they seized his arms. Dae-geun struggled in disbelief at the unexpected situation.

"Why me? No, why me!"

"You used an illegal viral marketing company, didn't you? The employees of that company have all been apprehended on site."

"……"

"It seems you need to be urgently questioned. Let's go for now."

The police had raided the scene of the crime.

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News of a more intriguing story than Cha Seo-bok’s confirmation hearing spread within Max Planning.

[From last Friday until today, the mastermind behind the all-out online terror incident against Saerun Group was arrested this morning at 11 a.m. The perpetrator has been identified as Ham Dae-geun, the CEO of Daegun Industries.]

As those who were unable to attend the confirmation hearing gathered outside the police station, many reporters were present. Soon, a man stepped out of a police car, denying his crimes while throwing another bait to the reporters.

[It’s not me, it’s that Jeong Ji-heon from Max Planning that should be arrested! That guy did something terrible to my fiancée!]

Although the names of others were muted in what Dae-geun was saying, anyone from Max Planning knew who he was referring to.

“It’s not me, it’s Jeong Ji-heon from Max Planning that should be arrested!”

The employees who understood the meaning of his words scoffed in disbelief.

“What nonsense is that?”

“Seriously, what nonsense is that?”

“Exactly. What nonsense is that? Our director is the real victim here.”

Naturally, the employees of Max Planning were infuriated. To insult Director Jeong Ji-heon felt like an insult to themselves. Recently, following the Remi Remi incident and the drama-like marriage announcement, they had turned their opinions of Ji-heon from negative to positive and were now ready to protect him.

They had a weapon.

The recorded files exposed in the company when Cha Eun-bi resigned.

Director Jeong Ji-heon had sent an email to the staff asking them to delete the files, but there was no way they would delete valuable information without a word.

The employees eagerly tipped off reporters about the recorded conversations between Cha Eun-bi and Jeong Ji-heon.

The counterattack had begun.

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Jeong Oh quietly shouted in her mind.

“Cha Eun-yeob, just wait.”

At 11:50 a.m., the morning session of the confirmation hearing was coming to a close.

Ch140 - Weakness of Love

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Jae-gwang had only returned home once in the past week. He was able to confirm everything about Saerun Group through the news. He never asked about the company's situation, and Jae-gwang never shared anything either, but Young-mi couldn't help but worry.

When she knew nothing, she had hastily concluded that bad news had come all at once. However, after overhearing Jae-gwang's phone call during his brief visit, she began to suspect that someone might be behind it all. At that moment, Cha Eun-yeob flashed through her mind.

Cha Eun-yeob, Cha Eun-bi. Once, Young-mi was the most supportive person for this brother-sister duo, but she had to admit that they were also the most cunning.

Regret washed over her for everything that had happened in the past.

If only I hadn't taken a liking to Cha Eun-bi, if only I hadn't sought legal advice from Cha Eun-yeob at every turn, if only I had tried harder to listen to my son's feelings, if only I hadn't pushed for the marriage—none of this would have happened.

And today, Young-mi had also come across the news article about Ham Dae-geun's arrest. Seeing Ham Dae-geun enter the police station while mentioning her son made her crumble to the floor.

Young-mi couldn't believe what Ham Dae-geun was saying, which only deepened her despair.

My son is in crisis because of me. I've pushed my son into this situation…

“Ma’am!”

A staff member rushed to Young-mi, who had collapsed, and helped her to her feet. Young-mi’s legs were already covered in dark bruises.

“Oh my. Look at those bruises… Are you okay?”

Standing up with the employee’s assistance, Young-mi walked to her bedroom.

Throughout the week since the troubles at Saerun Group began, Young-mi had felt completely wrecked. She had been suffering from what felt like a body ache as if she had been beaten all over, but she hadn’t been able to visit a hospital. It felt like punishment from the heavens.

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The employees at Max Planning, still unaware of the full situation, gathered in Production Team 1 to confirm the rumors they had heard.

“It’s true, right? The CEO of Daegun Industries is the fiancée of Manager Cha Eun-bi! What will happen to her now?”

“Did that Ham guy go on a rampage out of jealousy because he thought Director Jeong did something terrible to Manager Cha?”

“While his father is preparing to become the Chief Justice, the guy who’s supposed to be his husband is ruining everything for him.”

The employees shuddered as they talked about Cha Eun-bi. After nearly a week of online terror against Saerun Group, the employees were quite exhausted.

For the next two hours, public opinion on online communities remained unfavorable until an article correcting the relationship between Cha Eun-bi and Jeong Ji-heon was published. Harsh criticisms against Ji-heon were rampant. Jeong Oh also felt frustrated but endured it and continued to work diligently.

Assistant Ko Eun-joo called out to Jeong Oh.

“Hey, Assistant.”

“Yes?”

Eun-joo called Jeong-oh over and just stared at her without saying anything.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, I just wanted to call you.”

She wanted to check if her colleague, who was having such an eventful day, was okay.

But she couldn’t say that and instead expressed her frustration.

“Having someone you love seems to be a headache. It creates weaknesses.”

“Do you really see it as a weakness?”

“Not being able to only think of myself is a huge weakness.”

“That’s true.”

Jeong-oh nodded in agreement with Eun-joo’s perspective and smiled.

“But, Assistant Ko, while there are weaknesses, it also means you can become strong enough to overcome and resolve those weaknesses.”

Eun-joo found Jeong-oh’s response intriguing. As an individualist, Ko Eun-joo always found Jeong-oh to be an interesting person. She knew Jeong-oh had gone through tough times but had never seen her show signs of exhaustion; she was always full of energy.

Is that really the power of love? Does having someone you love truly make you stronger?

For Eun-joo, who disliked being tied down and found dating bothersome, Jeong-oh’s insights were always refreshing.

In the meantime, Jeong-oh’s phone vibrated. The smile on her face widened even more.

“I’ll take this call for a moment.”

“That’s Director Jeong calling, right?”

“How did you know?”

“Just by looking at your expression.”

Haha. What’s my expression like? Jeong-oh chuckled awkwardly as she tucked her phone into her pocket and stepped away. It was a welcome call from her husband, who had stayed out late due to work.

“Hello?”

[Did Ye-na get to daycare okay?]

As soon as Jeong-oh picked up, Ji-heon asked about Ye-na.

“Yes, of course she did.”

[Sorry I couldn’t contact you this morning; it was hectic.]

“Ye-na will understand. It’s fine.”

Jeong-oh spoke reassuringly so Ji-heon wouldn’t worry. A sigh could be heard on the other end. His voice was soft, but he sounded quite exhausted.

[It’s too chaotic. My dream is to live simply and peacefully with just family.]

“Once you were born as Jeong Ji-heon, you have to give up on simplicity.”

[…….]

“Hurry and finish everything, then come home and sleep.”

[Will your wife tuck you in when you get home?]

“Pfft. How should I tuck you in?”

[Well, something suggestive?]

Jeong-oh thought he would ask her to read a fairy tale to Ye-na or sing a lullaby, but even in this moment, he hinted at something more mischievous. It was probably a 100% playful joke, but when Ji-heon said it in his voice, it felt entirely sincere, causing Jeong-oh’s face to turn red.

Jeong-oh quickly changed the subject.

“Um, so, if Ham Dae-geun said that to the reporters, then he probably doesn’t know about the recording, right?”

[Not only that, but there’s a high chance that Ham Dae-geun got incorrect information through Chae Eun-bi or Chae Eun-yeob.]
“Exactly! That seems to be the case! Eun-bi was acting as if the baby in her belly is Ji-heon’s child…”

She was about to say that but quickly shut her mouth. It didn’t feel right to speak carelessly about Eun-bi.

[Huh?]
“No, never mind.”

Ji-heon didn’t press her about why she had fallen silent. They needed to catch up on the things they hadn’t discussed since they hadn’t met in a while.

[I found out who the employee from the genetic research lab that Chae Eun-yeob bribed is.]
“Did they get caught too?”

[The method of finding out isn’t legal, so I can’t arrest them. But I can use it in another way.]

“So, are you going to bribe that person?”

[No. That can never happen.]
“……”

[We have to squeeze them dry so they can’t even pick up their bones. Then they will naturally take revenge on Chae Eun-yeob.]
Jeong-oh felt chills down her spine throughout Ji-heon’s response.

I’m glad I’m going to spend my life with this man. If he were anyone else, an enemy, I would have been truly scared.

He was relentless in tormenting others to get what he wanted. That was Ji-heon’s way.

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The night before.

Ji-heon gathered all the materials related to the online terror attacks and headed to the police station.

Thanks to hiring professional hackers, he had pinpointed the initial leads of the crime, and through reverse tracking, he was able to identify the approximate location of the attacks.

The criminals had set up an office in downtown Seoul and were systematically carrying out online terror attacks. Now, with the police’s help, they just needed to catch the perpetrators at the crime scene.

The police carefully planned the operation and, as dawn broke, they stormed the location.

During this process, Ji-heon unexpectedly reunited with someone at the police station.

“Ji-heon.”

It was Sergeant Kwon Bae-il.

“Oh, Su-il… Bae-il.”

Ji-heon was surprised and paused before calling out his name. He remembered that Bae-il had previously worked at the Gwangjin Police Station and had been transferred to a rural area, so he found it odd to see him here at the Yongsan Police Station.

“Weren’t you transferred to a rural area?”

“Yeah. I was assigned to Jinju, but I came here briefly for something.”

“To the Yongsan Police Station?”

“Yeah. I worked here a long time ago.”

Ah… Ji-heon nodded quietly. While she felt happy to see Bae-il, the awkwardness of the years spent without any news was unavoidable. Noticing this, Bae-il was the first to speak.

“I saw the news. Are you here because of the situation with Seoreon Group?”
“Yeah.”
“I hope it gets resolved well. If you need help, just let me know. I’ll be in Seoul for a while.”

Unlike before, Bae-il’s demeanor was quite friendly. For the first time, Ji-heon felt reassured by him.

The day of reckoning had started off well.

The moment Ham Dae-geun entered the police station, Ji-heon was also there. He heard Ham Dae-geun speak about himself in front of reporters, and Ji-heon smiled.

He had stated that all of this happened because of Jeong Ji-heon and that it led him to commit crimes. That was practically a confession of his own wrongdoing.

Ji-heon personally didn’t care about external evaluations at all, so it didn’t matter to him what lies Ham Dae-geun spun; it had no effect on him.

He felt no injustice and didn’t particularly think about restoring his honor by correcting the truth. As long as he could use that fact to pressure Ham Dae-geun, nothing else mattered.

He remembered his father’s advice about being cautious for the sake of Jeong-oh and Ye-na, which made him worry momentarily, but even that was quickly resolved.

It was said that the employees at Max Planning were rushing to tip off reporters with the truth. The employees had known about the relationship between Ji-heon and Eun-bi for a long time.

This was because the details of their conversations had been exposed to the employees. While they might face public condemnation for a few hours, Ji-heon believed that the reporters would eventually set the facts straight.

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Eun-yeob only heard about Ham Dae-geun after the morning session of the personnel hearing had ended.

“What a crazy bastard.”

Upon checking the news article, he couldn’t help but curse. Ham Dae-geun had carelessly thrown out bait that would attract reporters. He felt humiliated to think that he would marry into a family like this.

As he trembled with anger over Ham Dae-geun’s insane behavior, the phone rang. It was Ham Dae-geun. Eun-yeob felt he had to give him a piece of his mind, so he answered the call.

“Hello.”

[Lawyer, you need to come quickly.]
Before Eun-yeob could say anything, Ham Dae-geun spoke first. Eun-yeob

feigned ignorance and asked,
“What’s going on?”

[You’ll understand if you see the article, but I’m in a tight spot right now. Come immediately.]
“It’s difficult right now. You know I have the personnel hearing today.”
[Your father will manage. This is an emergency!]

“Mr. Ham, losing your cool will only make things worse.”

Eun-yeob tried to reason with Ham Dae-geun, who was throwing a tantrum about coming over immediately.

“Just hold on a bit longer, and I’ll bring you good news. This is the most important moment in your father’s life. If you can just hold out a few more hours, your father will gain absolute power.”

[…….]
“First, call the company’s lawyer. Don’t get rattled; exercise your right to remain silent. Once I wrap this up, I’ll come by in the evening. I’ll take care of everything then, understood?”

Eun-yeob quickly hung up the phone after giving his instructions.

Right now, the priority was his father. He could focus on other matters once the personnel hearing was safely concluded. The weaknesses that Ham Dae-geun had on him were things that could not be proven. Eun-yeob acted meticulously at every moment.

He received the money in cash. There were no text message records, no documents, and no files left behind.

It would be difficult to investigate the creation of slush funds. Until charges were proven, they wouldn’t even be able to conduct a search and seizure.

Even if there was a chance that Ham Dae-geun confessed everything, there would be nothing they could do. The money was hidden in places no one

knew about, so even if they searched Eun-yeob’s house, they wouldn’t find anything.

There was no need to rush. So he decided to act with confidence.

Eun-yeob finished a quick meal with his father and calmly prepared for the questioning over tea.

At 1 PM, the afternoon session of the personnel hearing began smoothly, as scheduled.

Ch141 - I am arresting you.

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The investigation into Ham Dae-geun was a headache for the police from the start. He immediately called for a lawyer and kept his mouth shut.

Once a lawyer was involved, it was unclear what strategy he would employ, so Ji-heon needed to act quickly. He requested to meet with Ham Dae-geun as the victim and was granted that opportunity.

“Why are you here…?”

Ham Dae-geun froze when Ji-heon appeared.

“I’m here as the victim.”

“…”

“I’m the victim of the incident caused by you, Ham Dae-geun.”

Sitting close to Ham Dae-geun, Ji-heon casually asked with a barely perceptible smirk, “Did Chan Eun-bi say that I did something terrible to her, or did Chan Eun-yeob say it?”

As expected, Ham Dae-geun turned his head away and did not respond. He looked regretful about what he had said outside the police station.

“Chan Eun-bi and I are not involved at all. That’s something Chan Eun-bi acknowledges, and Chan Eun-yeob knows it too. No matter who it is, you’ve been blindsided, representative.”

Ji-heon presented a document in front of Ham Dae-geun, an old copy of a complaint he had filed.

“This is a copy of the complaint. This is the truth. The Chan siblings have spread so many rumors that I filed this complaint a while ago. Chan Eun-yeob came to ask me to withdraw it on August 12.”

“…”

“And since the online terror against Se-ryeon Group began on August 13, it seems Chan Eun-yeob met with you on the night of the 12th.”

As Ji-heon accurately pointed out the dates, Ham Dae-geun’s eyes widened. Ji-heon could see Ham Dae-geun’s face twitching as he slowly turned his head.

With a calm voice, Ji-heon shared the harsh truth.

“Shall I tell you something?”

“…”

“Chan Eun-yeob will abandon you. If he had been thinking of saving you, he would have already come running. Or at least he would have sent Chan Eun-bi.”

Stirring discord was not just Chan Eun-yeob’s specialty. Jeong Ji-heon was also someone who could exaggerate and lie skillfully to achieve his goals. Although he was confident that everything he was saying now was true.

“The Chan siblings don’t even have that much loyalty. They won’t care about you at all. You are merely a stepping stone for them. Once they’ve risen, they won’t need that stepping stone anymore. While they may need it to safely descend, they won’t think about coming down once they’ve gone up.”

Ham Dae-geun trembled without being able to breathe. Ji-heon’s calm voice and sharp gaze felt like they were tightening around him, piercing him.

He began to think that everything Ji-heon said could be right. He hadn't heard from Chan Eun-bi at all. Chan Eun-yeob said his sister was unwell, but it was strange not to hear from her even once.

He felt he had done everything he could for them, yet here he was, caught in the police station with nothing to show for it. The thought of his lost money lingered in his mind.

Ham Dae-geun sent the cash from his home safe to Chan Eun-yeob. It was five boxes filled with apples.

Since there was no evidence, it was easy for Chan Eun-yeob to wipe his hands clean of the money.

As Ji-heon's voice trailed off, the police stood up.

"Then we'll wrap up the confrontation for now…"

"…He took the money."

At that moment, Ham Dae-geun spoke up. The police turned to look at him.

"That guy said that Chan Eun-yeob needs 6 billion won to convince the members of the National Assembly…"

Ji-heon, who was about to stand up, paused at Ham Dae-geun's resignation-laden words.

"Chan Eun-yeob. That guy is truly ruthless. He even studied hypnosis to manipulate clients. I fell victim to him too."

Hypnosis.

While listening to that desperate statement, Ji-heon suddenly felt a severe headache. As his ears felt clogged and dizziness washed over him, he quickly stood up and exited the room.

He needed to leak information to the reporters and have everything published. That was the only way to stop the confirmation hearing.

“Ji-heon, are you okay?”

As Ji-heon stumbled out the door, Bae-il, standing outside the criminal investigation department, called out to him with a concerned expression.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Aren’t you pushing yourself too hard? You should rest.”

“No, really, I’m okay. More importantly, Bae-il, I need to talk to you about something.”

Clenching his teeth against the headache, Ji-heon quickly mapped out his next steps in his mind.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

4 PM.

As the hearing progressed, one of the assembly members brought up Ham Dae-geun.

“I saw a news report during lunch, and I believe we need to address the candidate’s family issues. The recent online terror incident involving Se-ryeon Group is said to be part of a conspiracy. The mastermind behind it was reportedly Ham Dae-geun, the representative of Da-geun Materials, who is about to marry your daughter. Is that true?”

“I know the name Ham Dae-geun, but I don’t know anything else about him. I would consider it an individual’s misconduct.”

Chae Seo-bok spoke into the microphone, relaying the facts. This was the answer he had practiced during lunch.

Since the contact had been made by Eun-yeob, and he had never met Ham Dae-geun, it was entirely true. Chae Seo-bok had also seen the article about Ham Dae-geun’s misconduct but had laughed it off.

“So you’re saying you had no contact with Representative Ham Dae-geun at all?”

“That’s correct.”

Once Chae Seo-bok firmly stated that, the assembly member did not ask any further questions.

The hearing seemed to be nearing its conclusion within an hour or two. The finish line was in sight.

Just as he was feeling relieved in silence, someone looked at their phone and said, “We’ve received breaking news. Everyone should check the news.”

Another assembly member chimed in after confirming the breaking news. “It would be a good idea for the candidate to check it as well.”

No one criticized the opinion, so Chae Seo-bok turned on his phone to check the article. The headline at the top of the portal site made his heart sink.

“Chae Seo-bok, Supreme Court Chief Justice nominee, implicated in corruption allegations. Ham Dae-geun of Da-geun Materials confesses to funding.”

Chae Seo-bok looked up at Eun-yeob. It seemed Eun-yeob, too, was at a loss for words after reading the article.

Eun-yeob, with a flustered expression, hurriedly began typing a text message. Just then, a message popped up on Chae Seo-bok’s phone. It was from Eun-yeob.

– Just say you know nothing about it. There’s no evidence anyway.

After reading the article, one of the assembly members asked, “Candidate Chae, please tell us directly what this is about!”

“I have no knowledge of this at all. I am just as bewildered as anyone else. I have never met Representative Ham Dae-geun…”

“Well, Candidate Chae might say he doesn’t know Ham Dae-geun. But if the arrangements were made through your son without direct contact…”

“I have no knowledge of this at all. I cannot even imagine my son doing such a thing.”

“Candidate, such absolute trust is frightening. The Chief Justice must judge impartially, whether the person in question is a complete stranger or his own son, based on the same legal standards.”

Seizing that opportunity, one assembly member criticized the qualifications of the Chief Justice. Cold sweat formed on the foreheads of both Chae Seo-bok and Chan Eun-yeob.

The assembly member even read aloud from the article.

“Mr. Ham stated, ‘Mr. Chae passed some of the funds he received to someone among the 13 members of the Confirmation Hearing Committee and solicited a smooth confirmation hearing…’ Who is this? Who is sitting here pretending nothing is wrong after accepting a bribe? Who has sullied this sacred National Assembly?”

“This is unprecedented. To have corruption revealed on the very day of the Chief Justice candidate’s confirmation hearing!”

Another member supported the agitated assemblyman.

Amidst the commotion, Chae Seo-bok spoke in a heavy voice.

“I am a person without a single stain upon my conscience. Since becoming a judge, I have believed that my life only has meaning in serving the people. Integrity and honesty are my greatest pride. I swear to heaven! I would stake my life and the integrity of the court on this! The current article is all false reporting. It is all a conspiracy against me. An immediate investigation is necessary.”

Chae Seo-bok’s declaration, pledging his life and the court to his words, once again stirred the assembly into chaos.

“Candidate Chae is betting his life on this. Shouldn’t we believe him? Isn’t it truly suspicious that such an incident occurs on the day of the confirmation hearing?”

“Suspicious or not, we must investigate! Or is it possible that you, Assemblyman Kang, received a bribe? Why are you suddenly defending Candidate Chae?”

“Are you trying to blame someone else out of nowhere? Meanwhile, Assemblyman Yoon, you’ve been silent all day, and now you’re getting agitated right after the article came out. Did you perhaps receive a special order to bring down Candidate Chae?”

“How dare you insult me like that!”

The assembly members began to argue amongst themselves. The sacred National Assembly had turned into a scene reminiscent of a mafia game.

Unable to endure it any longer, the chairman finally spoke up.

“We’ll need to call Candidate Chae’s son to the witness stand. Where is he?”

All eyes turned to Chae Eun-yeob. Although it was unexpected, Eun-yeob had no choice but to take the stand as a witness. This was the only way to help his father.

Eun-yeob stood in the witness box with the kindest expression he could muster. After taking the oath, a member of the assembly asked him, “Do you know Representative Ham Dae-geun?”

“I know him.”

“Your younger sister is about to marry Representative Ham Dae-geun, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. He will be my sister’s husband. While I serve as the legal advisor for Da-geun Materials, our relationship does not extend beyond that.”

“So, what about Representative Ham Dae-geun’s confession that is currently making news?”

“I think I need to investigate that as well. As you all know, I have never engaged in any solicitation.”

A few assembly members exchanged glances. If Eun-yeob admitted to solicitation, it would only make things worse for the assembly member who was allegedly bribed. So they needed to protect Eun-yeob until the end. Eun-yeob was well aware of this.

“I believe it might be a personal mistake made by my sister’s fiancé. I must be cautious in saying this, but to speak the truth, my sister hasn’t met Representative Ham Dae-geun for a week due to issues regarding their relationship. I think it’s likely a conflict arising from that… I believe that one person’s poor choice should not impede the proceedings of this sacred National Assembly. I kindly request the resumption of the hearing.”

“How can we continue the hearing under these circumstances?”

Despite Eun-yeob’s polite request masked as honesty, the assembly member was still upset and could not compose himself. As one person raised their voice, the others followed suit in anger.

Ultimately, the chairman suggested a break.

“It seems we’re getting a bit heated, so we’ll take a short break. The hearing will resume in 30 minutes. In the meantime, I ask that members consult with the police to quickly clarify the facts.”

Even after the break was announced, reporters kept clicking their cameras. Chae Seo-bok, with an expression of rage, glared at Eun-yeob before leaving the hearing room. Eun-yeob hurried after him.

After confirming that reporters couldn’t follow them, Chae Seo-bok finally confronted Eun-yeob once they were far from the hearing.

“What the hell is going on?!”

“Father, let’s talk outside. We can use the side entrance.”

It was dangerous inside the building. There was no telling who might be eavesdropping from which room or corridor. Eun-yeob guided Chae Seo-bok to a quiet side door he knew.

“There was no one among the assembly members with whom I had direct contact. Everything was relayed through close associates, and there were no mistakes.”

Chae Seo-bok looked at Eun-yeob with skepticism.

“You know how meticulous I am. Just continue with the hearing confidently. Just make Ham Dae-geun look like a madman.”

Eun-yeob calmed Chae Seo-bok’s agitation and set a clear alternative.

At that moment, a man’s voice came from nearby.

“Wait! There he is!”

Eun-yeob flinched and turned his head.

From the direction of the voice, a crowd of people was approaching. There were at least ten reporters. As they rushed over, those who had come out during the break and reporters waiting outside the National Assembly joined them.

“Mr. Chae Eun-yeob, is it true that you received money from Ham Dae-geun to solicit the hearing?”

“That’s not true!”

Surrounded by reporters in an instant, Eun-yeob shouted to protect Chae Seo-bok. They needed to get back inside the building, but he couldn’t move. Meanwhile, two men ran up without cameras in hand.

“Mr. Chae Eun-yeob?”

Oddly enough, as the two men appeared, a path opened up as if the Red Sea had parted. The reporters made way, even though they still had their cameras aimed at him.

Eun-yeob looked at the two approaching men. They were burly figures.

“We’re from the police. You need to come with us to the police station.”

As the police touched his arm, Eun-yeob shook it off violently and shouted.

“Are you doing this on purpose? What kind of rude behavior is this at such a crucial time?”

“…”

“Don’t think you can pressure me with some unverifiable slush funds. Who on earth is behind this vile scheme?”

“Oh come on. Just think of your father and cooperate quietly…”

The police sighed as if they had no choice and grabbed Eun-yeob’s arm again.

“Chae Eun-yeob, you are being arrested for conspiracy to commit murder.”

As the police informed him of his rights, Eun-yeob’s vision went white.

It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t be…

“What are you talking about? I’m being accused of conspiracy to commit murder!”

“You know Cheol-wangpa, right?”

“What’s that?”

“Let’s talk about this at the station, given that there are so many eyes around.”

With both arms restrained, Eun-yeob thrashed about.

“Are you serious? This is also a smear campaign! Are you saying my sister’s fiancé attacked the Seoryeon Group, and that’s why this is happening? Is this the power of the Seoryeon Group?”

He thought he had to drag the Seoryeon Group into the situation to muddy the waters.

But what the police pulled out of their pocket was an unexpected item.

His heart sank.

“Mr. Chae Eun-yeob, a phone belonging to Kim Jin-goo was found at your residence.”

Eun-yeob’s face turned pale.

There was something other than money that he needed to hide, and he had completely forgotten about it.

But he had hidden the phone in a place where no one could find it, with the power turned off. Who could have possibly found it…?

In the distance, he saw Ji-heon watching.

The sight was so chilling that it felt like all the blood drained from his body.

Ch142 - Who Turned It On?

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A long time ago, after dealing with Kim Jin-goo, Chae Eun-yeob received and kept the phone.

He considered throwing it into the river or smashing and burning it, but he held onto it because he didn’t know what information it might contain. Eun-yeob thought that once his father safely became Chief Justice, he would decrypt the phone’s contents after the urgent matters were settled.

So he kept the phone, setting it to airplane mode even after turning it on, and hid it away securely.

Now, he couldn’t understand how that phone ended up in the police’s hands.

He had hidden it even more securely after being discovered by Eun-bi.

‘Could it be… Eun-bi?’

That couldn’t be. It just shouldn’t be.

This was all because of Eun-bi!

***

Thirty minutes passed in chaos, and the confirmation hearing resumed.

After his son was taken away, Chae Seo-bok returned to his seat, clutching his racing heart. He felt as if he had lost a limb.

“There was quite a significant incident during the 30-minute break,” the chairperson began.

“Candidate Chae Seo-bok’s son has been arrested. However, the charges are not about slush funds; it’s for conspiracy to commit murder,” he continued.

“…We still don’t have the details,” Chae Seo-bok replied, struggling to maintain his composure.

The lawmakers all wore expressions filled with malice. Even those who had received money from Eun-yeob looked no different.

“Have you received a proper explanation from the police regarding the slush fund?”

“They said it’s under investigation,” a representative replied to the chairperson’s inquiry.

“Not having a clear answer means there’s some degree of suspicion, doesn’t it?”

“We need to halt this immediately.”

“It’s really going to be difficult to continue the hearing like this.”

“Let’s suspend it. We can’t go on any longer.”

The lawmakers spoke in unison. The chairperson had to make a heavy decision.

“By unanimous consent of the special committee members, we will suspend the confirmation hearing.”

The chairperson declared the suspension after considering everyone’s opinions.

The confirmation hearing was halted—a historic first.

Chae Seo-bok, who had been preparing to toast his inauguration as Chief Justice, left the National Assembly in shambles.

It felt as if the world had collapsed. He couldn't even lift his head, yet had to walk upright as if he were dignified, which was both miserable and painful.

Surrounded by reporters, it was the most humiliating walk of his life.

"This is the first time in South Korean history that a confirmation hearing has been suspended. How do you feel about it? Have you heard anything from your son?"

"Is it true that Chae Eun-yeob hired someone to commit murder?"

"My son is not that kind of person!"

Chae Seo-bok shouted in anger.

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A few hours earlier.

Ji-heon's hired counselor had contacted him.

[Sorry to bother you while you're busy. I've managed to identify the vehicle that was following Kim Jin-goo.] "Go ahead. I'm listening."

[Are you familiar with the organization called Cheol-wangpa?] "No, it's my first time hearing about it."

[It was a car owned by that organization. I went to the scene and confirmed it, and I've sent you the photos via email.] "Did you find out about the relationship between Kim Jin-goo and Cheol-wangpa?"

[According to my investigation, there was no connection. However, it seems Cheol-wangpa is involved in hiring assassins.] "…You're saying there's a possibility of murder?"

[That’s a cautious prediction, yes.] “Understood. I’ll check my email.”

[And I’ve also identified the employee from the genetic research lab who was bribed by Chae Eun-yeob. The details are attached to the email as well.] “Thank you very much.”

After finishing his call with the counselor, Ji-heon immediately checked his email.

He confirmed the identity of the genetic research lab employee that Chae Eun-yeob had bribed, as well as the fact that the vehicle that had been following Kim Jin-goo the day before his death belonged to an organization called Cheol-wangpa.

What should he do about this?

He could deal with Han Dae-geun and Chae Eun-yeob first, then look into Cheol-wangpa afterward.

But what if Cheol-wangpa was linked to Chae Eun-yeob? This was something he absolutely could not overlook, and it would be best to resolve it today if possible.

As Ji-heon contemplated this, unexpectedly, Bae Il appeared. He confidently told Ji-heon to let him know if he needed help, as if he were hoping Ji-heon would ask for assistance.

After facing Han Dae-geun, Ji-heon confided in Bae Il about his concerns, revealing past events.

After being released, Kim Jin-goo had threatened Eun-bi, and for some reason, he believed that Ji-heon was following him. Ji-heon learned that on the day of Kim Jin-goo’s death, he had received an email from him that contained information about someone pursuing Kim Jin-goo.

“This isn’t an ordinary case, is it? Kim Jin-goo was ruled as an accidental death,” Bae Il remarked.

“Did I mention it was ruled an accidental death?” Ji-heon replied.

“…Yeah. You did earlier,” Bae Il answered in a lowered voice. Ji-heon, feeling a bit dazed, easily accepted this. He then revealed that the car chasing Kim Jin-goo was owned by Cheol-wangpa.

Bae Il believed everything Ji-heon said. Just having that trust made Ji-heon feel reassured.

Bae Il took Ji-heon back to the Criminal Investigation Department to review the electronic records concerning Kim Jin-goo’s death.

“The phone went missing from the scene. It’s likely sunk in the reservoir,” he noted.

“I’ve heard that,” Ji-heon replied.

“Have you tried calling this number since Kim Jin-goo’s death?”

Bae Il pointed to Kim Jin-goo’s phone number as he asked. Ji-heon chuckled, thinking the question was a bit odd, and replied.

“If I call, it’ll either say the number doesn’t exist or that the phone is turned off.”

Still, his fingers instinctively dialed Kim Jin-goo’s number. It felt like a natural action. But then—

Ring, ring.

“…Huh?”

“…”

“There’s a dial tone?”

Ji-heon, who had dialed the number without any thought, was also taken aback. The call waiting tone was playing. However, no one picked up the phone, and it went to voicemail.

“…I can’t take your call right now, so you’ve been connected to voicemail.”

“Someone might have inherited Kim Jin-goo’s phone number. If not…”

“…”

“The person who took the phone might have accidentally turned it on.”

At Bae Il’s calm suggestion, Ji-heon felt a chill run down his spine.

Bae Il quickly tracked the location of Kim Jin-goo’s phone. It was in Seoul. Ji-heon recognized the building.

“…It’s Chae Eun-yeob’s house.”

While they couldn’t tell which floor it was on, it was definitely the mansion where Eun-yeob lived.

Upon Ji-heon’s confirmation, Bae Il immediately stood up. After hearing all the details from Ji-heon, Bae Il began to have reasonable suspicions.

“I’ll hand this over to the team in charge and head straight to Cheol-wangpa. The team will figure out why Kim Jin-goo’s phone is there, and if they can’t get a satisfactory answer, they’ll search this building right away.”

Ji-heon was momentarily stunned by Bae Il’s quick actions, then clenched his fists just like Bae Il did.

That smart, energetic boy from long ago had become a reliable, sharp-witted, and fast-acting police officer.

“Thank you. Really, thank you.”

“I’m just doing what I should.”

“…”

“It’s going to be a long day. I hope you stay safe.”

Bae Il said his goodbyes and left.

Two hours later, Bae Il contacted Cheol-wangpa and quickly secured a statement about Kim Jin-goo. He acted as if he had been ready with several weaknesses of the organization for today. It was confirmed that Cheol-wangpa had acted under Chae Eun-yeob's orders.

The police, having secured the statement from Cheol-wangpa, immediately searched Eun-yeob's residence. Kim Jin-goo's phone was found sealed inside the air conditioning unit.

It showed clear signs of careful concealment, but there was a very foolish mistake: the phone was turned on. That's why they were able to find it so quickly.

As Ji-heon watched the situation unfold and Eun-yeob being taken away, a large question mark remained in his mind.

"Did Chae Eun-yeob really leave the phone on?"

A powered-on phone? The meticulous Eun-yeob wouldn't make such a mistake.

It felt like a message saying, "Please notice me, come take me away."

Eun-yeob wasn't that kind of person.

So who had turned it on?

There was another surprising aspect. All the unresolved issues that had lingered for so long were neatly resolved in just one day. Of course, Ji-heon's presence at the police station and his pushing for action played a big role.

Everything fell into place as if it had already been prepared. It felt as though the heavens had opened a path for Jeong Ji-heon, allowing things to proceed smoothly.

It was such an extraordinary, almost miraculous occurrence that it was hard to believe it was mere coincidence.

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“Chae Eun-yeob, the eldest son of Chae Seo-bok, arrested on charges of conspiracy to commit murder.”

“Unprecedented: Suspension of Supreme Court Chief Justice Nominee Hearing”

“Supreme Court Chief Justice Nominee Chae Seo-bok Evicted from National Assembly, Claims Ignorance of Slush Fund”

“Which Lawmaker Received Orders from Chae Eun-yeob?”

The world, which had been saturated with news articles about the Serene Group, quickly changed its tune. Every newspaper highlighted articles about Chae Eun-yeob and Chae Seo-bok.

Public opinion, which had been clamoring for a boycott of Serene Foods, now erupted with demands for a special investigation into Seo-bok.

As the commotion escalated, evening fell.

Bae Il seemed busy organizing the events of the day. Ji-heon left the police station without even being able to thank Bae Il.

While he handed over the criminal charges to the police, there were still company matters to clean up. Ji-heon headed to the headquarters instead of going straight home, where he held a meeting with the group’s executives to discuss how to wrap up the incidents.

That night, the subsidiaries of the group would release a final statement regarding the series of events, and all of it would be covered in the news. By the next morning, everything would likely be sorted out.

After the meeting, Ji-heon exhaled deeply, his tension finally easing. He patted his brother Ji-tae on the shoulder, who had worked hard. Behind them, Chairman Jeong Jae-gwang gave a satisfied nod and issued a directive.

“Now you can stop working at the advertising agency and come into the group headquarters.”

“Excuse me?”

The relaxed expression on Ji-heon’s face tensed up again.

In that moment, he realized he had messed up.

He had been pursuing a leisurely lifestyle, always revealing only half of his abilities, but for the past week, he had worked incredibly hard.

Ji-heon shook his head vigorously, alarmed.

“No, I can’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“Father, I just met my brother again after seven years.”

“So I got you married to stay close.”

“I did that on my own, you didn’t force me!”

“Anyway, you just need to be at home. Why do you have to stay at the office too?”

“If I go to headquarters, you’ll just have me working all the time and won’t let me come home.”

His voice turned desperate all of a sudden.

“I absolutely can’t do it. I don’t have the ability. I don’t have the qualities of a leader like my brother.”

“Stop talking nonsense and sort this out.”

Jae-gwang, who had been closely observing Ji-heon, wouldn’t budge.

The fact that Serene Foods, which started as a snack factory, had grown into a large corporation was largely due to Jae-gwang's insight in placing the right people in the right positions. He was confident in his instincts once again: Ji-heon was an excellent talent.

"I'll eliminate your position in that company by next month."

As Ji-heon persisted in his stubbornness, Jae-gwang had no choice but to be equally resolute. Ji-heon gazed at his father for a long time with narrowed eyes, then forced a wry smile, lifting one corner of his mouth.

"Father, you really shouldn't do that to me."

"What's wrong with that? Who are you to say?"

"Yena's dad."

"……"

"You shouldn't do that to Yena's dad."

"……"

"Don't you want to keep in touch with your granddaughter?"

At Ji-heon's provocation, Jae-gwang's eyes widened for a moment. However, his voice softened as if he were nervous.

"…Is Yena doing well?"

"I'll have to go check on her. She seems upset because I didn't say hi when she went to daycare the past few days…"

"Oh dear. How cute…"

While the father was worried that the child might be upset, the grandfather was delighted, imagining the cute pouty face of his grandchild.

Granddaughter love, world peace.

In any case, Ji-heon managed to evade the crisis thanks to the child.

“Come over and play with Yena. You can stay the night.”

Jae-gwang shared a simple wish with Ji-heon, who was about to leave.

“Sure.”

It had been a long day.

After ending the conflict, he was finally on his way home.

Ch143 - I Know This Feeling

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“Mom, is Dad coming today?”

“Of course.”

Yena asked the same question every ten minutes.

“Mom, is Dad coming today?”

“Yes, I told you he is.”

“But why isn’t he here yet?”

“He’s just busy with work. He’ll be here soon.”

Jeong-oh couldn’t give a cool answer, as she was also waiting. Still, she felt relieved knowing that everything had been resolved.

Jeong-oh followed the events through internet news, worried that even a small incident might harm Ji-heon or the Serene Group. Surprisingly, everything seemed to be going smoothly.

After all her anxieties had dissipated, Jeong-oh rubbed her belly and went to find Guk-soon. Guk-soon was at the table with a cookbook open, studying for her Korean cuisine chef certification.

“Mom!”

Guk-soon lowered her magnifying glass and looked up with a frown.

“What is it? Are you craving something again?”

“Ugh. Do you think I’m a pig? You always say that whenever I call you.”

“Then why did you call me?”

“What are we having for breakfast tomorrow?”

Guk-soon chuckled in disbelief, playfully hitting Jeong-oh’s bottom.

“Oh, my little piggy. If you’re not thinking about food, what do you think about all day?”

“No, I’m only like this in front of you. In front of others, I’m just like everyone else. I haven’t had an appetite all week because I was worried about my husband, but I’m finally starting to feel hungry.”

“Not having an appetite? You skipped meals and whatnot.”

“Oh come on. It means I felt like I hadn’t eaten anything even when I did.”

Guk-soon smiled comfortably at Jeong-oh’s excuse. The mood at home had been heavy while Ji-heon was tied up with work, but now the tension had eased.

Guk-soon sliced a pear and placed it in front of Jeong-oh. As Jeong-oh tried to scoop out the remaining flesh from the pear core, Guk-soon immediately offered her a nicely cut piece.

“Don’t eat that. Eat this instead.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Take it. Hurry.”

Guk-soon held it up to Jeong-oh’s mouth, and she had no choice but to set down the pear core she was holding.

“You only eat the pretty pieces. Anything.”

Jeong-oh shrugged, as if she didn’t understand why her mom said that, and accepted the fruit Guk-soon offered. Just then, they heard the sound of the door opening.

“Daddy!”

Yena was the first to shout and ran out. Jeong-oh and Guk-soon followed her.

“Wow!”

As Ji-heon lifted Yena high in the air, Jeong-oh also rushed over and embraced him.

Ji-heon’s face, which had been taken aback by such a warm welcome, brightened with joy a moment later.

“Did Yena do well?”

“Yes! Did Daddy finish all the busy work?”

“Yep. It’s all done.”

“Now you don’t have to work late anymore?”

“Right. I won’t work late anymore.”

“Yay!” Yena cheered. Guk-soon approached and asked.

“You must have worked hard. Are you tired? Have you eaten?”

“Yes.”

“What did you eat?”

“Just some bread…”

“Is that enough to eat? You should eat more. I’ll grill some mackerel for you.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Go wash up quickly.”

Before Ji-heon could stop her, Guk-soon headed straight to the kitchen.

He was finally home.

The relief that came with that realization almost brought tears to Ji-heon’s eyes.

Ji-heon finished every dish of the seven-course meal prepared by his mother-in-law.

“Do you want more rice? Are you sure you’re not still hungry?”

“No, I really ate a lot. Thank you.”

“No, I should be thanking you.”

Guk-soon responded warmly to Ji-heon’s gratitude.

“Mother, I think I like women.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I like you, of course, and I like Jeong-oh, and I like Yena too. That’s why I really love being home.”

Guk-soon, taken aback by the unexpected confession, widened her eyes in surprise before bursting into laughter.

Certainly, her impression of her son-in-law had changed since their first meeting. At first, she was worried that such a well-mannered and timid guy could handle being her child’s husband and her grandchild’s father, but it turned out he was quite the charming and capable man.

“I hope you only have daughters in the future.”

“I think it will be a son.”

“Huh?”

“Just kidding.”

Guk-soon quickly covered her mouth, realizing she was acting too silly like her son-in-law, and then secretly laughed.

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After Cha Eun-yeop’s arrest, the company quickly returned to normal.

Ji-heon, finally able to take care of himself, visited the hypnosis counseling center with Jeong-oh. He shared his recent experiences and emotions with the doctor, including Cha Eun-yeop’s story at the end.

“There’s this guy named Cha Eun-yeop—well, I can’t really call him a friend—who was always at odds with me, and he got arrested. I heard from someone else that he even studied hypnosis to manipulate people. Hearing the term ‘hypnosis’ made my head throb and my stomach churn. I think I might have a strong aversion to hypnosis itself.”

As Ji-heon spoke, Jeong-oh, who was deeply focused on his story, also felt a wave of nausea.

Jeong-oh rubbed her chest and cleared her throat.

‘Did I get too immersed in this?’

It was a strange feeling.

Meanwhile, Ji-heon was preparing for his second hypnosis session beyond the glass wall.

“Let’s see if it’s really an aversion to hypnosis or if there’s another reason. Today, I’d like to try again. Personally, I hope that when you try to recall the past, it won’t be painful for you. I plan to focus on that during hypnosis; is that alright?”

“Yes.”

Ji-heon, who trusted the doctor, responded emphatically.

Following the doctor’s instructions, Ji-heon closed his eyes.

As before, the doctor described Jeong-oh’s old room. This time, he had received images of the room’s exterior and the actual studio apartment from Jeong-oh, allowing him to depict it more accurately than before. Unlike the previous session, Ji-heon’s breathing was quite stable.

“Can you picture the view from the room clearly?”

After a long pause, Ji-heon finally replied.

“…Yes.”

The doctor quietly felt relieved that Ji-heon was able to visualize the room’s scenery without any resistance. However, there was also the possibility that these were mixed memories, as Ji-heon had decorated his previous home similarly to Jeong-oh’s studio.

“You spent a lot of time in that room. Can you see it?”

“…”

“If it gets too difficult, just let me know.”

Despite the doctor’s concern, Ji-heon showed no reaction. Occasionally, his fingertips and brow would twitch, making Jeong-oh anxious.

After a while, Ji-heon finally spoke.

“I… made food.”

Jeong-oh’s eyes welled up with tears.

“What kind of food did you make?”

It seemed he couldn’t recall anything beyond that, as Ji-heon fell silent again in response to the doctor’s question.

Seven years ago. It was a time so long ago that even ordinary people, without any significant events, would find it hard to remember. The doctor cautiously continued.

“Shall we move to another moment? You found a pregnancy test in that room belonging to your girlfriend.”

That was where Ji-heon had previously tried to recall his memories but had stopped. Since this was the point where there had been a reaction, the doctor couldn’t give up. Ji-heon’s brow furrowed tightly. Just watching him made Jeong-oh’s heart race.

Sigh.

Ji-heon let out a deep sigh and opened his eyes. While he hadn’t succeeded in recalling the memory in detail, one could say he had achieved some progress. Ji-heon woke from the hypnosis without a strong aversion and didn’t feel nauseous. There was no pain either.

However, it seemed all that distress had transferred to Jeong-oh. Unable to contain her nausea, Jeong-oh rushed straight to the bathroom.

“Ugh.”

She barely made it to the sink before grabbing onto it. Although she didn’t throw up, she felt queasy and retched a few more times.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Jeong-oh, are you okay?”

Ji-heon, having exited the counseling room, knocked on the bathroom door and called out. Jeong-oh struggled to respond immediately as she tried to catch her breath.

I know this feeling.

Tears welled up in Jeong-oh’s eyes again as she searched through her long-forgotten memories.

Yet, it hadn’t been this intense back then.

For some reason, she felt an ominous premonition that something significant was about to come.

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Eun-yeop remained trapped, but hope was on the horizon.

Everything proceeded in the usual manner, but there seemed to be many obstacles, as both the police and the prosecution were taking their time, and it took quite a while to reach the pre-arrest interrogation. The court had yet to deliver a verdict.

If a warrant for arrest is not issued within 48 hours of an individual’s arrest, the police must release the suspect.

The 48 hours from the police to the prosecutor, and from the prosecutor to the judge for the issuance of the arrest warrant is indeed tight solely based on those procedures. If there’s a delay at any point, the entire process can come to a halt.

Eun-yeop was confident that she would soon be released. There was little time left until her release. While some were pressuring her, it felt like others were protecting her. Eun-yeop believed it was her father’s influence.

During the excitement of her arrest, her previously blocked mind began to reboot.

It was truly a mystery how the police found Kim Jin-goo’s phone. It was hidden in a place that no one could find unless they smashed everything in the house. And it had been powered off.

It seemed someone had found the phone and handed it over to the police.

‘It must be that bastard, Jeong Ji-heon.’

Convinced that the culprit was Ji-heon, Eun-yeop began to visualize what she needed to do as soon as she left the police station.

‘Jeong Ji-heon, I’ll make sure you can’t move a muscle.’

As she clenched her fists in determination for revenge, the door to the holding cell opened.

“Cha Eun-yeop. Come out.”

The police seemed much more respectful than before. From their attitude alone, Eun-yeop felt she could predict her fate. She was finally able to leave. A subtle flush appeared on her face.

As Eun-yeop stepped out of the holding cell and dusted off her clothes, she asked, “What was the result?”

“You’re being released.”

“An investigation without detention, then.”

Eun-yeop quietly celebrated in her heart. A smile quickly spread across her face.

Of course.

‘Jeong Ji-heon, take a look at this. My father’s influence is substantial.’

Eun-yeop felt a thrilling sense of victory that made her stomach churn. However, the police then spoke somberly.

“We may need to conduct another substantive examination of the warrant in a week.”

“…What?”

“Cha Eun-yeop, we’ve been informed that your father has passed away. You should hurry and go see him.”

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As one person’s life wanes, another’s gradually blossoms.

After finishing work, Jeong-oh stopped by a pharmacy to buy a pregnancy test.

A mix of emotions flooded her, and naturally, memories of that day seven years ago came rushing back.

The day she first bought a pregnancy test at the pharmacy. Even after all this time, the memory of that day remains as vivid as the two red lines on the test.

On that day seven years ago, all four tests Jeong-oh bought showed the same result. Jeong-oh hesitated to tell Ji-heon about it, but he found the tests in her room.

He had gently reassured Jeong-oh, saying they would go to the hospital together to get her maternity booklet.

After making such a reassuring promise, he disappeared the next day. So, Jeong-oh thought she had been abandoned.

It was also a memory filled with regret for Jeong-oh.

If only she hadn’t given up on him back then, if she had stood up more firmly against his mother, if she had tried to contact him again after three months, or even a year. Then, things would surely have been different.

With a heavy heart, Jeong-oh imagined the time she had missed.

Jeong Ji-heon cutting the umbilical cord, Jeong Ji-heon cheering as their child took their first steps, Jeong Ji-heon taking celebratory photos for their child’s first birthday, Jeong Ji-heon teaching their child how to play Go… Beautiful scenes she had never experienced unfolded in her mind.

The regrets of the past made her eyes well up with tears, but a smile held them back. The thought of a new beginning filled her with excitement. She

felt hopeful, a feeling she hadn’t experienced in seven years.

Thump, thump, thump…

Sitting alone in the bedroom, Jeong-oh’s heart raced as she waited for the results of the test.

Ch144 - Where Dreams Have Disappeared

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On the way home from work.

Ji-heon felt a growing sense of urgency as he headed home.

Jeong-oh, who had left work earlier, mentioned that she stopped by the pharmacy on her way home. Although she said she wasn't sick, he couldn't shake off the worry about her condition. Even at the hypnotherapy center, Jeong-oh had rushed to the bathroom, looking unwell.

As he parked the car and stepped out, his phone rang. It was Bae-il. He had left a text message when he exited the police station, and it was only now that he was getting a call back.

"Bae-il."

Ji-heon answered the phone, greeting the name that still felt unfamiliar with warmth.

[Ji-heon, I haven't been able to contact you because I've been busy. Sorry.]
"It's okay; I understand. Is everything settled now?"

[Yeah, it's mostly sorted out. I got an urgent assignment, so I couldn't say goodbye to everyone, but I'll be leaving for a long business trip next week.]
"Good. I'll drop by again. Or would you like to come over to my place? I'd like to invite you."

[…….] "Your mom, Jeong-oh, and Ye-na will all be happy to see you."

After a long pause, Bae-il finally responded, as if it wasn’t an easy decision.

[Then I’ll try to make time next week.] “Thank you. I’m fine with any time.”

[It’ll probably be around next Tuesday.] “Got it. Just let me know that morning.”

[Okay, I will. Take care.] After a straightforward conversation with Bae-il, Ji-heon went straight upstairs. As usual, Ye-na rushed over to him first.

“Daddy!”

“Did you have fun today, Ye-na?”

“Yes!”

After lifting Ye-na up for a moment and then setting her down, Guk-soon also came out to the entrance. Jeong-oh was nowhere to be seen.

“I’m back.”

“Yeah. You should hurry and have dinner.”

“Yes. Where’s Jeong-oh?”

“She hasn’t come out of her room. You should check on her.”

“Yes. And, um, Mom, there’s something I want to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“Do you remember Bae-il? He used to live next door to us, the police officer.”

“Of course. I heard he helped a lot in solving this case.”

“Yes. I’m planning to invite Bae-il over. Is next Tuesday okay with you?”

“That’s perfectly fine! We can have dinner together.”

“I was thinking of ordering food since it might be difficult for you to prepare.”

“No, it’s not a bother at all. My food is better than takeout. The police officer likes my cooking.”

Even with her cheerful response, Guk-soon sensed Ji-heon hesitating, so she reassured him again.

“It’s really no trouble.”

“Thank you. Then I’ll come home early to help out.”

“That would be great.”

Before he knew it, Ji-heon had developed a good rapport with Guk-soon. She had to admit that Ji-heon had more culinary skills than Jeong-oh.

Ji-heon greeted Guk-soon and entered the bedroom. Even though he carefully opened the door, Jeong-oh was startled.

“Ah!”

Noticing Jeong-oh quickly hiding something behind her back, Ji-heon approached her.

“What are you hiding?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“Is it a secret?”

“Well, I guess you could say that.”

But Jeong-oh couldn’t withstand Ji-heon’s approach as he leaned in and reached out his arm. She soon found herself caught as he effortlessly snatched the pregnancy test she had hidden.

Feeling embarrassed for having taken the test too early, Jeong-oh raised her hands to cover her cheeks. The result on the pregnancy test was ambiguous. There were two lines, but the line on the right was faint compared to the control line.

“No… it’s still faint, so I was planning to take it again later.”

“Is this what you call faint?”

Ji-heon tilted his head as he held the test in front of her.

“Wait, when did it get this dark?”

When Jeong-oh checked, the red line had become much darker than before. It was now indistinguishable from the control line.

Jeong-oh also brought out another test she had left on the vanity.

“Wait, this one has also gotten darker! It seems to be getting more pronounced,” she remarked.

Seven years ago, she had checked the results quite quickly, and now she felt anxious.

Both tests displayed a prominent red line. Ji-heon stood there, staring blankly at the two pregnancy tests. Noticing Ji-heon’s shock, Jeong-oh timidly asked, “Are you okay?”

“…It was the same seven years ago, right? I’m sure.”

“Huh?”

“It wasn’t just one back then.”

He was recalling the events from seven years ago.

“Yeah. What I meant when I said no was that. The doctor asked me about it. He said there would be a pregnancy test in the drawer of your desk.”

“…”

“No, there were multiple. Right?”

As Ji-heon spoke with increasing certainty, Jeong-oh’s eyes began to glisten with unshed tears.

Everything he said was correct. Seven years ago, Jeong-oh had bought four tests, and Ji-heon had discovered the one on the desk and the three hidden in the drawer.

“…Do you remember?”

His eyes were also becoming red. Ji-heon raised a hand to cover his mouth, as if he couldn’t believe it himself.

“Are you okay, oppa?”

Finally, his hand fell away, and a sigh escaped from his lips, twisting in a way that words could not express the complexity of his emotions. Ji-heon extended his trembling hand and pulled Jeong-oh close by her shoulders.

Hiding his face over her shoulder, he let out a long sigh and said, “I feel strange.”

“…”

“Let’s promise we won’t ever separate again.”

His trembling voice sounded almost like he was about to cry. The grip around her waist tightened. Jeong-oh felt a bit overwhelmed, but she thought she could understand his feelings and gently stroked his back.

After a while, Jeong-oh finally broke free from Ji-heon’s embrace. His eyes were still red.

“How are you? Do you remember everything?”

“I remember seeing the pregnancy test that day. You looked really flustered, and I left without being able to talk.”

“Right! That’s how it was!”

Jeong-oh rejoiced as she shared that memory.

Once Ji-heon calmed down a bit, he said, “Anyway, thank you.”

“For what?”

“For everything.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Thank you for being born.”

“…”

“I love you.”

In response to what seemed like a joking tease, Ji-heon answered seriously as he took Jeong-oh’s hand and kissed the back of it.

Thinking one kiss wasn’t enough, he placed several more kisses on her hand. Jeong-oh felt like she was finally parting with the timid girl she was seven years ago. She felt excited about the time ahead.

If only the phone hadn’t rung, they could have been even happier.

The intruder of the day was Ji-heon’s brother, Jeong-ji-tae. Ji-heon let out a short sigh before answering the phone.

“Yeah. Hyung.”

[Have you heard the news?] Jeong-ji-tae rushed to deliver the news without even the chance for a greeting.

[Cha Eun-yeop’s father has passed away.] It was the news of Judge Chae Seo-bok’s death.

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As Ham Dae-geun was detained and others spoke recklessly about him, on the same day, her brother was also taken in on charges of inciting murder, and her father’s confirmation hearing was put on hold. It felt as if everything was her fault, and Eun-bi hid away. It was only after hearing the news of her father’s passing that she rushed back.

— The children are not at fault. It’s all my fault.

The brief note left by Judge Chae Seo-bok deepened Eun-bi’s despair. She clutched the coffin and wept bitterly.

“Dad, Dad…”

As the funeral preparations were nearing completion, Eun-yeob arrived. She appeared disheveled after spending two days at the police station and, upon approaching her father’s coffin in a daze, her legs gave out, and she collapsed.

Unable to say a word, sad sobs escaped through her parted lips.

“It’s all your fault, oppa.”

Eun-bi reprimanded Eun-yeob.

“Is marriage that important? Is money that important? What’s so significant about it?”

“…”

“If it weren’t for you, Dad wouldn’t have ended up like this.”

“…”

“If you hadn’t gotten involved with Kim Jin-gu, this wouldn’t have happened!”

Her voice rose in intensity as her emotions boiled over. In the depths of despair, Eun-yeob turned her head to look at Eun-bi with a fierce glare.

“Isn’t it you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Aren’t you the one who reported that cellphone?”

“Ugh.”

Seeing her brother still unable to take any responsibility and spouting nonsense only added to Eun-bi’s frustration.

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During the funeral, many people came and went.

Eun-yeob couldn’t maintain her position as the chief mourner for long. After the dramatic scene of her being taken in by the police on charges of inciting murder was broadcast live, people’s gazes turned cold.

Some openly refused to shake hands with Eun-yeob. She no longer forced a phony smile toward those who avoided her.

Her dreams had vanished. In the place where her dreams had disappeared, only hatred remained.

She could never forgive the person who had caused her father’s demise and driven her into despair.

Clenching her fists in determination for revenge, Eun-yeob opened her personal email inbox. She recalled an email that had been delayed for a while. She had requested a courier service to look into Kim Jin-gu’s grievances but hadn’t opened it because she was too busy preparing for the confirmation hearing.

The lengthy email was dizzying, but Eun-yeob persevered and read through it.

“As you know, Kim Jin-gu was involved in many petty crimes leading up to the hit-and-run incident seven years ago. Among the victims from that time, there are several who have not received proper compensation. I will attach their list and the related incidents.”

It seemed the courier service had put in considerable effort for the investigation, including the attached materials. However, there didn’t seem to be any men with a physique similar to Kim Jin-gu’s among the individuals involved. Feeling disappointed, Eun-yeob scrolled down the email until her eyes landed on the end.

“There is one case with a clear victim, but the identity has not been confirmed. Although it’s meaningless to talk about it since it happened 24 years ago, I will leave this information as you requested to look into any grievances.

Kim Jin-gu’s family once ran a large restaurant in Namwon, Jeonbuk. At that time, about 24 years ago, there was a woman they hired at the restaurant. She moved to Namwon with just her son, having no husband, after working in a restaurant in Seoul. Due to certain circumstances, she had to relocate.

It was said that the boy’s mother was very young and beautiful. Kim Jin-gu’s father apparently had a history of infidelity and made advances toward her.

Afterward, a significant incident occurred. Kim Jin-gu’s mother blindly trusted her husband and accused the boy’s mother of seducing Kim Jin-gu’s father. Shortly after, the boy’s mother passed away from cancer. It was said that she had suffered so much at the restaurant that she could not receive timely treatment.

There were no documents left about the boy’s mother. She had the surname Yoo, but no one knew her exact name. Given the long time that had passed, nothing could be found out about the child either.

The boy’s mother’s son was said to have been around 9 to 10 years old at the time and very intelligent. When asked why they moved from Seoul to Namwon, it was because the boy’s favorite Go player was from Namwon.

Ch145 - It’s You, Right?

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On Saturday, Ji-heon visited the funeral home of Judge Chae Seo-bok with Jae-gwang. In the mourning hall, there were only Eun-bi and Seo-bok’s wife. Eun-yeob was nowhere to be seen.

Eun-bi looked extremely tired, yet she surprisingly exhibited a composed demeanor. It seemed she no longer had any feelings left for Ji-heon.

Although there was no commotion inside, they were exposed to several reporters guarding the front of the funeral home. The reporters kept pressing for Ji-heon’s thoughts on the situation and the ongoing lawsuits, but he didn’t respond. The 30-minute visitation felt as long as a day.

Once Ji-heon got into the car, he pulled at his tie, feeling stifled.

“It’s quieter than I expected. There’s not much sympathy out there.”

“Everyone feels bitter. They only learned about Chae Seo-bok during the confirmation hearing, and now he’s gone without a chance to truly understand him.”

Jae-gwang clicked his tongue, wearing a troubled expression.

“But it seems your mother isn’t coming?”

“She’s not feeling well.”

“Is she very ill?”

He wanted to say that she had been bedridden for a long time and that she probably needed to be examined, but Jae-gwang held back. Instead, he voiced a small hope.

“Why don’t you ask your mom to come for a bit while she’s still around? Even if it’s just you.”

“…”

“If you reach out first, I’m sure your mom would accept it, even if she pretends not to.”

“Not yet. Maybe after things settle down a bit.”

The son refused. But his expression was a little strange.

“Settle down?”

Noticing Jae-gwang’s confusion, Ji-heon smiled and added a word.

“I’ll tell you later.”

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Monday.

Ji-heon visited a hypnosis therapy center with Jeong-o. He wanted to tell the doctor that some memories had started to resurface.

“On Friday night, when I saw my wife’s pregnancy test, memories came flooding back. The scenes were as clear as yesterday.”

“That’s great news! Could you share a bit more about that time?”

Ji-heon shared everything that had happened on Friday with the doctor. After hearing Ji-heon’s story, the doctor fell into thought.

“The events from the day before the accident seem scattered like puzzle pieces. But perhaps we can organize them? Meeting with Jeong-o, what

happened after you separated, when you bought the ring, when you visited the flower shop… Then you mentioned preparing to propose to Jeong-o the next day. What might you have done? You also thought about the child that would be born; what kind of plans did you have?”

Ji-heon nodded at the doctor’s suggestion and then added another thought.

“Oh, doctor, there’s something else that’s come to mind.”

“Yes, please go ahead.”

“I mentioned before that the man who caused the hit-and-run accident passed away recently. But it keeps bothering me that he felt quite wronged. I can’t shake the feeling that someone might have framed him, even though it seems unlikely.”

“Are you saying you hope to recover memories from the time of the accident as well?”

“Yes. It’s a related incident that happened around the time my memories returned. So I thought it might be possible.”

“…”

“I have vague memories of regretting not treating Jeong-o well at the time of the accident. Since I have memories from the day before the accident and from when I collapsed immediately after, I think I might be able to recall what happened during the accident as well.”

Ji-heon understood the significance of the puzzle. Seeing his determination, the doctor felt compelled to give it his all.

To recover the memories of that day seven years ago, Ji-heon closed his eyes at the doctor’s instruction.

“Let’s return to November 2nd, seven years ago. I found my girlfriend’s pregnancy test. There was one on the desk and three in the drawer. My girlfriend seemed very flustered, but I couldn’t comfort her and left her house right away. I had a promise to keep. What promise was that?”

“…I went to a charity event.”

“And afterward?”

“On my way back, I bought the proposal ring and stopped by a flower shop… I ordered the proposal flowers from a shop called ‘Flower Dream.’ I made a reservation for the next day and used my card…”

“Did you go straight home after that?”

“…I went home and called Jeong-o…”

As Ji-heon recounted things that Jeong-o also knew, he slowly added a new memory in a hushed voice.

“…I suggested we go to the hospital and told her to get the mother’s health record. And I said I was sorry…”

“What were you sorry for?”

“I said I was sorry for holding her back when she must have wanted to do so much.”

It was a story they had never shared before. Jeong-o, who had been quietly observing from another room, felt warmth well up in her eyes. Her heart raced.

His memories were returning.

“We agreed to meet at three the next day.”

“Then did you fall asleep right away?”

“I had trouble sleeping, but… I tried to fall asleep anyway.”

“Then shall we talk about the next day? What did you do after you woke up?”

“…I texted Jeong-o that I’d come pick her up.”

“…”

“She replied, ‘I’ll see you,’ and I smiled.”

“Why did you smile?”

“Because it was so cute.”

At that response, the doctor momentarily forgot his professional demeanor and chuckled softly. Jeong-o also smiled, her eyes glistening with tears.

“…Then my mother called next. She mentioned my brother… that he had been egged. So I told her not to worry… I also mentioned that I had a friend to introduce her to.”

“What was your mother’s reaction?”

“She asked who it was, but I only said I’d get back to her.”

“Well, it sounds like it’s about time for you to leave home.”

The conversation slowly continued, and they were nearing the moment of the hit-and-run accident.

The doctor checked Ji-heon’s body temperature, breathing, and pulse before continuing. It was a tense moment for the doctor as well.

Jeong-o’s heart raced as if it was squeezing her entire body, making it hard for her to watch. Nevertheless, she resolved to stay in her seat.

“You must have taken the elevator down to the parking lot. What were you thinking on the way to your parked car?”

“I was thinking about the baby that was about to be born. I was thinking about all the things I wanted to do for the child.”

“And?”

“Then…”

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“…”

“I couldn’t think anymore…”

Ji-heon’s hand clenched tightly, the veins on the back of his hand and forearm standing out. He tried to open his mouth but hesitated, his face contorting in anguish as he gasped, releasing a harsh breath.

It felt like he was experiencing the shock of the accident all over again.

Jeong-o shot up from her seat, thinking that recalling any more would be dangerous.

The doctor made the same judgment.

“It would be better to open your eyes. I’ll count to three, and you’ll come back to the present. One, two, three.”

Ji-heon’s eyes shot open. The urgency in his expression indicated that he had hastily emerged from hypnosis, leaving traces of pain in his gaze and breath. His chest heaved heavily.

“It’s okay. You did well. Take your time and breathe. Hoo… slowly…”

The doctor tried to stabilize Ji-heon, who was exhaling harsh breaths with a dazed expression. Ji-heon, still unable to calm down, cautiously blurted out a disjointed question.

“…Have I heard of it before?”

“What did you just say?”

“…While talking about something, he asked me if I had heard of it. That man.”

“That man? Are you saying the man who caused the accident spoke to you? To Ji-heon?”

“The man got out of his car and asked me if I had heard of something.”

“…”

“What could that have been?”

Frustrated by the lack of additional memories, Ji-heon asked. It was a question he directed not at the doctor but at himself.

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Guk-soon headed to the academy. After nearly 20 years, he was starting to study again. While it was challenging to keep up with the pace of younger students, he also felt a sense of joy and excitement at feeling rejuvenated.

As Guk-soon arrived at the academy, someone approached her and spoke.

“Hello, ma’am. How have you been?”

“Oh my, who is this! It’s been a while.”

To her surprise, it was Kwon Bae-il, wearing a hat pulled low over his face, making it hard to recognize him at first. Guk-soon greeted him warmly.

“I heard you’re coming to my house tomorrow. My son-in-law told me.”

“Ah… there’s been a bit of a problem with that…”

Bae-il trailed off, seemingly in a difficult situation.

“Why? Are you busy?”

“Yes. Something came up for tomorrow. I have to go back to Jinju urgently.”

“Oh no, what should I do? Both my son-in-law and Jeong-o, and even Ye-na, were looking forward to it. That’s disappointing.”

“I’ll drop by when I come back to Seoul next time. Oh, but I do have some time today.”

“Really? Then how about we have dinner together today? I’ll prepare something delicious for you. I want you to keep thinking about it even when you’re in Jinju.”

“Is that alright?”

“Of course! Come by around seven. I’ll have a nice meal ready.”

“Yes. I’ll do that. I’ll contact Ji-heon.”

Advertisements

“Could you? Thank you. I’ll see you later then.”

Guk-soon bid farewell to Bae-il and headed straight into the academy building. Bae-il watched her back for a long time.

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“Kwon Bae-il.”

Last night, Chae Eun-yeob had visited Bae-il. How she found him and tracked him down was a mystery.

“You know me, right? You must know. There’s no way you wouldn’t.”

Eun-yeob had a smile on her face. It hadn’t been long since she lost her father, yet she appeared surprisingly vibrant.

No, it was more like a fierce determination.

Eun-yeob’s eyes sparkled with intensity, as if she had come knowing everything.

“You’re the one who did that to Kim Jin-goo seven years ago, right? It’s you.”

“……”

“You used your police status to take out both Kim Jin-goo and Jeong Ji-heon at the same time. You’re a scary guy.”

Eun-yeob was certain.

She had tracked down the traces from 24 years ago. After moving from Seoul to Namwon, the process of finding a deceased unwed mother had been arduous but not impossible.

The clue of “a Go player from Namwon” was useful. The famous Go player Lee Kang-ho was from Namwon. Eun-yeob researched the village where Lee Kang-ho lived and the elementary school he attended.

After much effort, she discovered the name Yoo Soo-il. He was a boy of the same age as her. After his mother died, he was adopted by his aunt and changed his name from Yoo Soo-il to Kwon Bae-il.

Kwon Bae-il was a police officer at the Yongsan Police Station seven years ago, sharing the same height and similar build as Kim Jin-goo.

And, astonishingly, he was also a classmate of Jeong Ji-heon from elementary school. He was part of the gifted Go class.

After figuring out Bae-il’s background, Eun-yeob became convinced of everything.

Kwon Bae-il clearly held a grudge not only against Kim Jin-goo but also against Jeong Ji-heon.

“What kind of grudge could you possibly have against Jeong Ji-heon to do something like this? Huh?”

“……”

“You tried to kill Jeong Ji-heon while living next to Lee Jeong-o and spying on her, huh?”

“……”

“Are you totally infatuated with Lee Jeong-o or something? Huh?”

Eun-yeob noticed Kwon Bae-il flinch at the mention of “Lee Jeong-o.” She had thought she would never smile again after losing her father, yet the thrill and excitement bubbled up, making her grin. Eun-yeob spoke in a cunning voice.

“How do you feel knowing that guy is still doing well? Don’t you want to kill him?”

“……”

“How about we get rid of Jeong Ji-heon together? What do you say?”

She had found a tempting proposal to fulfill her wish.

“I’ll give you 1 billion won if you just do as I say.”

“……”

“What do you think? Does that pique your interest?”

Ch146 - 24 years ago, on November 2nd

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It was a busy day.

As noon approached, she chatted away with Jiheon while they moved along.

“Today gave me chills all day. How could that happen? I mean, it’s from seven years ago—a lot of people wouldn’t remember something from that far back.”

“It felt like a wall blocking the memory was just gone, and suddenly, I could recall everything. Though it’s just the memory of November 2nd.”

“No way. You even remembered November 3rd!” Jeong-oh replied excitedly. Jiheon laughed at her heightened voice, but his smile soon faded.

Was Kim Jin-goo really the hit-and-run driver?

What exactly did the culprit say to me?

Amid the excitement and wandering thoughts, they arrived at their next destination. Their next stop was the OB-GYN clinic.

Actually, Jeong-oh had wanted to wait a bit longer, but Jiheon had been pestering her since Friday night, so she couldn’t resist.

The last time she came to the OB-GYN for a prenatal check-up with Jin-seo, there had been no signs, so it felt strange that something had changed

with her body since then.

As they waited for their turn, Jiheon, already drinking the kimchi soup, whispered to her, “Do you think it’ll be a girl or a boy?”

“…You’re not actually expecting to find out today, are you?”

“Of course not. I’ve done my homework. It’s only about this big now,” he replied, holding up his thumbnail. Hearing that he had done some research made Jeong-oh feel a bit emotional.

If it weren’t for the accident seven years ago, he probably would have been the best dad in the world. Maybe he’d even cherish and love the baby more than she would.

“Would you prefer a daughter or a son?”

“I had a talk with my mom a few days ago,” he said.

“….”

“At that time, I thought daughters were the best. But now, whether it’s a girl or a boy, it would be wonderful either way. Either way, they’ll look like you and me, so they’ll be beautiful.”

It was as if he was already nurturing the baby, saying sweet things. She felt emotional again as the nurse called her name. The two of them went into the examination room together.

Looking over her chart, the doctor tilted her head as she faced the eager and bright-eyed couple.

“You’re here early. It’s only been a short while since your period ended….”

“Yes, but it showed two lines.”

“Even with two lines, it might not show up yet. Still, since you’re having symptoms, I’ll check with an ultrasound. Please change your clothes.”

After Jeong-oh left to change, Jiheon’s eyes grew wide.

“…Why does she need to change?”

“We need to do a transvaginal ultrasound.”

At the doctor’s explanation, Jiheon looked bewildered.

“You already have one child… You didn’t know?”

The doctor stared at Jiheon as if she couldn’t believe he didn’t already know this. Embarrassed, Jiheon realized he hadn’t done enough research.

A moment later, Jeong-oh, having changed, got onto the examination table. Seeing her tense expression, Jiheon felt anxious too. Watching an ultrasound wasn’t easy, and he’d been pestering her to go through this. He felt so sorry toward her.

“I can see the gestational sac.”

In the midst of his confusion, a small black pouch appeared on the monitor. Inside that sac was a small white ring-like circle.

That’s the yolk sac! I studied this!

As he recognized what he’d studied, Jiheon’s eyes sparkled again. But he had no time to show off his knowledge; theory and reality were worlds apart.

“If you come back in a week or two, you’ll probably be able to hear the heartbeat.”

They couldn’t hear the heartbeat yet, but Jiheon felt like he could already hear it. Maybe it was his own heartbeat, thundering with excitement that he couldn’t control.

This was even more amazing and miraculous than when his memories started returning.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Guksun hurried out of the academy as soon as class was over. She'd invited Bae-il over today, so she needed to go grocery shopping. As she rushed to the taxi stand, someone approached her again.

"Madam."

"Oh my, you startled me!"

Once again, it was Bae-il, who apologized, looking a little embarrassed.

"Did I scare you? I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine. I'm just getting old. But were you still around here?"

"I had something to do nearby. I was supposed to meet someone, but they stood me up."

"Oh dear, really? A lady?"

"Yes."

"Well, who in the world would stand up a respectable officer like you?"

Bae-il chuckled at Guksun's playful comment.

"Now I have some free time. Are you headed home? I can give you a ride."

"Oh, actually, I'm heading to the store to pick up groceries so I can treat you."

"In that case, let me take you to the store and drive you home afterward. I have plenty of time."

"Well, if you don't mind, that'd be great, though I feel bad since I invited you as a guest…"

"No, it's my pleasure. Let's go together."

As Bae-il took the lead, Guksun looked at him with satisfaction, feeling as though she had gained another son-in-law.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After stopping by the hypnotherapy center and the OB-GYN clinic, Jeong-oh returned to work for another busy day. After finishing a heated meeting, she returned to her desk and found that it was already time to leave.

‘Oh right, I haven’t called Mom yet.’

Today was Jinseo’s turn to pick up the kids from their classes. Worried that Guksun might forget and head to the academy, potentially missing Jinseo, she called her mother right away.

Guksun answered after quite a while, her voice sounding somewhat breathless.

[Hello?] “Mom, are you busy?”

[I’m just getting dinner ready. I’m having it with the detective.] “Mom, that’s supposed to be tomorrow.”

[Didn’t you hear? We moved it to today. The detective said he has to go down to Jinju for work tomorrow.] This was news to her. Jeong-oh’s eyes widened.

[So he even helped me carry everything home. He helped with the groceries and even came back to the house with me.] “What?!”

Jeong-oh shot up, feeling a sense of urgency. She wished she could instantly teleport home, imagining how awkward it must feel for her mother to be alone with the detective.

Eun-joo, noticing her pale face, guessed what was going on and spoke up knowingly.

“Looks like something’s come up again. Same old, same old.”

“Ah, Deputy Ko, I’m so sorry, but I think I’ll need to leave a little early.”

“Why apologize to me? You don’t have any more tasks today anyway.”

“Uh, could I leave just ten minutes early?”

“You don’t need my permission for that either.”

“I’ve been out of the office all day, and now I’m leaving early again, so I feel bad.”

“But you worked over the weekend, too. So did I, of course.”

“…”

“I actually hope you’ll set a great example and leave on time. Someone has to end this awful overtime culture in our ad agency. The computers should just shut off at six.”

Eun-joo clenched her fist in a fiery, determined gesture, then flashed a big grin. It had been a while since Jeong-oh had seen her smile.

“Not that I’m asking you to relay this to the director. But I won’t stop you if you do.”

“Alright, I’ll pass it along.”

Understanding Eun-joo perfectly, Jeong-oh smiled back.

“Well, I’ll be off then.”

After saying goodbye, she quickly left the office.

As soon as she stepped out, she called Jiheon. He was out in the field, so it took him a moment to answer.

“Are you busy?”

[Not too busy. What's up?] Though his tone sounded somewhat dry, Jeong-oh didn't want to hang up just yet.

"Did you know Officer Kwon Bae-il is coming over today? Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

[…I just heard that. Who told you?] "Mom said he's heading to Jinju tomorrow, so she invited him for dinner today. And apparently, he's already at our place."

[…I had no idea. I'll try reaching out to Bae-il.] "Alright, but make sure you come home quickly. The officer is already there."

[Got it. See you later.] The call ended abruptly. Just as hurriedly, she hailed a taxi to go home. On the way, she got a call from Jin-seo.

"Hey, sis!"

Through various experiences, she had begun calling Jin-seo "sis." Ever warm, Jin-seo was even more caring toward her than before.

[Jeong-oh, I picked up the kids, and Ye-na asked if she could play at our place for a while. I'll bring her back in an hour. Is that alright?] "Yes, that's fine. Thank you."

[By the way, is something going on? You sound a bit urgent.] "You know Officer Kwon Bae-il, right? Turns out he's a friend of Jiheon's. We've been wanting to invite him over to show our gratitude for helping us with a few cases. So we invited him over tonight."

[Oh, I heard they were friends from my husband! Actually, I meant to mention something to you recently.] "…"

[There's a picture of my son Do-bin from when he was little, taken at the flower shop, and you and Ye-na are in it, too.] "Really? That's amazing."

[Even more amazing is that in the next photo, Officer Kwon is in it too. It shows him moving in the same direction as you, as if he was following you. Isn't that interesting?] As she listened to Jin-seo's excited tone, a chill ran

down her spine for some reason. She recalled the day she first met Officer Kwon in the neighborhood and learned he was a neighbor. It gave her a strange feeling.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

After the call, Jiheon excused himself from the meeting and left immediately, feeling a bit thrown off. It was strange that Bae-il had gone to his house without letting him know.

When he tried calling Bae-il, he didn’t answer. Regardless, he had to go home. As he hastily turned his car, the tires screeched, and suddenly he was hit with a wave of memories from seven years ago.

Ugh.

Jiheon stopped the car briefly and massaged his temples.

“…Have I heard that name before?”

Seven years ago, the man who had left Jiheon after hitting him with a car had asked him a question. What was that name he’d asked about?

He felt like he almost remembered, like the memory was obscured by layers of fog. Jiheon took a steady breath, just as his doctor had taught him.

After a few moments of calming his mind, the fog began to clear.

“Have you ever heard the name Kwon Bae-il?”

As the memory surfaced, his heart pounded furiously.

He shook his head sharply. No, it could just be a coincidence.

But he had to be sure.

Jiheon urgently called his counselor.

[Yes, how can I help you?] “Hello, do you remember when I asked you to look into Kwon Bae-il before?”

[Yes, you asked me to check if there were any records of a name change, but nothing else.] “Is there anything at all, even just a brief history?”

[One moment.] He could hear papers rustling on the other end. After a moment, the counselor replied.

[On November 2, twenty-four years ago, his mother passed away. After that, he was taken in by his aunt.] “Did you say his mother’s memorial date is November 2?”

[Yes, looking again, her birthday and death date are the same: November 2.] November 2.

The day before Jiheon’s car accident, seven years ago.

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

Stepping out of the taxi in front of her house, Jeong-oh hurried upstairs.

When she opened the front door, no one came to greet her. She heard the faint sounds of clattering in the kitchen.

Walking carefully toward the kitchen, her gaze was drawn to something on the sofa.

A hat… red in the front, blue at the back, with a Spanish soccer team’s logo on the front.

It was the same hat a strange woman had worn on the day she’d tried to lure Ye-na away long ago.

‘Why is this here…?’

Her heart pounded with an eerie sense of dread as she made her way to the kitchen.

“Oh, you’re here?”

“Hello.”

Both Guk-soon and Bae-il greeted her. Bae-il was wearing Jiheon’s apron, helping her mother with cooking.

“Hi,” she responded softly.

“Jeong-oh, you should take the officer out of here. He keeps insisting on helping in the kitchen even though he’s our guest.”

Guk-soon chuckled as if amused by the events of the evening.

“Why don’t you come out? Leave that alone,” she said to Bae-il as her mother requested. Was she being too serious? At her words, he stepped away from the counter and took off the apron.

Cautiously, she spoke up again.

“By the way, the hat on the sofa…”

“Oh, that’s the officer’s. I put it there to make sure he doesn’t lose it.”

Seeing her hesitation, her mother responded first. Guk-soon didn’t know about the video taken on the day Ye-na got lost.

“It’s yours?” she asked.

“Yes.”

He replied briefly, with a slight smile that revealed nothing of his thoughts.

Why that hat, though? Why did Officer Kwon wear it here as if to flaunt it?

As she stood there frozen, her phone vibrated. It was Jiheon calling.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” Bae-il asked.

Slowly, she reached for her phone. It was Jiheon.

“Hello?”

[Are you home, Jeong-oh?] “Yes.”

[Is Kwon Bae-il there, too?] “Yes.”

[Listen carefully, and don’t panic.] As she stood there, phone pressed to her ear, Bae-il was still in front of her, smiling. But his smile felt colder than ever before.

[Kwon Bae-il might be more dangerous than we thought. Don’t provoke him. Stay calm. I’ll be there in ten minutes.] The call ended quickly.

“When will Jiheon be home?” Bae-il asked.

Though she hadn’t mentioned Jiheon, he seemed to know.

On the counter lay a knife in a precarious position.

Didn’t he say once he liked soccer because he couldn’t kick the culprit?

She remembered the joke he had made back then, how it hadn’t quite fit his kind appearance, and now she shivered at the thought that it might all have been intentional.

Seeing her standing there silently, he moved first. In her heightened state, she imagined he might harm her mother, and she cried out.

“No!”

Startled, her mother accidentally hit the counter. The knife slipped off and fell to the floor.

“What’s with you suddenly shouting like that? You scared me.”

Guk-soon looked slightly irritated, as if her behavior was rude in front of a guest. Bae-il waited until she picked up the knife and set it safely aside

before replying.

“It’s alright, ma’am. Ms. Lee Jeong-oh’s reaction is only natural.”

“…”

“Now that she knows the real culprit behind Ye-na’s kidnapping.”

Jeong-oh couldn’t help but notice the gun holster at his waist more than the faint smile on his lips.

Ch147 - Three People

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Some days, even without any physical injuries, things take a turn for the worst.

Days when you run into people you never wanted to see again, only to find out that they're doing just fine and don't even remember you.

That day, seven years ago.

If only he hadn't run into Kim Jin-gu, who'd been hauled into the police station for some horrible incident but was released without charges.

If only November 2 wasn't his mother's memorial day.

If only he hadn't run into Jung Jiheon that day.

If he hadn't, maybe nothing would have happened.

Late that night, after finishing work, Bae-il had stopped by a flower shop. He was already exhausted, and running into Kim Jin-gu had left him feeling raw. He was tired, but he instantly recognized Jiheon's face.

It seemed Jiheon was preparing for a proposal.

Bae-il had ordered a bouquet, but the florist was focused solely on Jiheon's order for the proposal flowers. Waiting for the florist to return, Bae-il stared at Jiheon for a long time. He wanted Jiheon to recognize him.

"The appointment is at three tomorrow, right? So if I come an hour early, it should be ready?"

“Yes, come by then.”

“Alright, see you tomorrow.”

But Jiheon didn’t recognize Bae-il. Jiheon seemed as if his head was filled only with thoughts of flowers.

Why can’t you remember me? I could never forget you. I couldn’t forgive you, and it was tearing me apart. My life has been a living hell.

He remembered the day his mother had passed. It had been her birthday.

Even at his new school, Bae-il had quickly stood out as a gifted student, and he brought an award from the science fair along with a small bouquet he’d bought with money borrowed from a friend. He visited her hospital room, only to find that she had closed her eyes for the last time before she could even see his award or flowers.

There are no words to describe the devastation of having the happiest day turn into the saddest.

The hatred he had repressed all those years surged back to life.

Bae-il clenched his fist, looking down at Jiheon’s proposal card.

Since his mother’s death, there had been no happiness in his life.

The grief of buying flowers and going to the columbarium on his mother’s birthday crushed his sanity.

Jung Jiheon, I hate you.

I hate you with everything I have, and I always will.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

Kwon Bae-il was a man who carried a gun.

Even though she believed he wouldn’t use it, Jeong-oh couldn’t read his intentions, and she was frightened.

With her mother also in the house, she had to be careful. She couldn’t afford to provoke either her mother or Kwon Bae-il.

Sensing her fear, Bae-il unfastened his gun holster and set it on the counter. Meanwhile, Guk-soon, who had discreetly been inching toward a nearby knife, withdrew her hand in relief. Mother and daughter were each trying to protect the other.

Jeong-oh understood that Bae-il wanted to talk to her, but she couldn’t ask nicely.

“…Why did you do that to my child?”

Why did you try to take her?

Why did you hide that note to intimidate me? Why?

“Why did you do that?”

“Because I just wanted you to keep living as you were.”

“…”

“You were happy just the way things were.”

“…”

“You’re someone who could be perfectly happy without Jung Jiheon.”

Bae-il spoke each word with precision, without hesitation.

At the time, he’d been slightly mistaken. He believed that Chae Eun-bi was Jiheon’s fiancée, and he hadn’t wanted to see Jeong-oh get hurt.

He had spent more time observing Lee Jeong-oh than he had investigating Jung Jiheon. He’d wanted her to give up on Jiheon, to stay content with her

child and mother.

Jeong-oh retorted bitterly.

“But Ye-na always wanted to see her dad. I always felt guilty toward her.”

The words brought a single tear down her cheek.

She glared at Bae-il briefly, then wiped her tears away.

Her mother was watching. Amid her fear, she wanted to keep her mother from being hurt, to preserve her faith in them both. She was willing to do anything to protect her family.

“It’s okay. It’s all in the past.”

She mustered the courage to speak.

“It makes me angry, but I can forgive it.”

“…”

“Because you seemed lost, too.”

I hope you’ll forgive yourself, too.

There were times I lost my way. After a struggle, I’d arrive somewhere that wasn’t the destination I’d intended. Some of those unplanned days turned out better. There were many.

Unexpected days can bring unhappiness, but happiness is there, too. Looking back, those unanticipated moments often turn out to be the best ones, better than days meticulously planned without a hitch.

I hope you come to know such a life. Regardless of any wounds you may have suffered, someone out there would want to comfort you. Don’t give up on happiness.

I was afraid, my heart pounding, but my genuine hope was that Bae-il would abandon all these dark thoughts. Sincerely, I urged him:

“So let’s start over. You can start over.”

“I can’t do that. Too much has already become part of the past.”

But Bae-il rejected Jeong-oh’s plea.

“Did Jiheon ever tell you?”

“…”

“Who was responsible for what happened to him seven years ago?”

Once again, her body tensed. This was a different matter. Her husband had suffered memory loss and trauma from an accident seven years ago. His abdominal scars still marked that time.

Was it possible that Kwon Bae-il was the one behind it all?

“If we’re talking about bad blood, it goes back 24 years. Back to when Jung Jiheon’s mother pressured my mother, stopping her from working at her restaurant.”

Bae-il continued in a calm tone.

“She couldn’t stand the thought of her son associating with someone like me. She didn’t just bar us from her restaurant—she prevented my mother from finding work anywhere in Seoul. I had to transfer schools. My mother struggled to make ends meet at her new job and eventually passed away. And I lost my own name.”

“…”

“I wanted Jiheon, of all people, to remember me. The same way his mother had relentlessly pursued and tormented my mother, I wanted Jiheon to remember and seek me out, to recognize my former name as well as my current one.”

His unhealed pain had turned into hatred.

The wild weeds that grew on barren mountains grew tough on their own, scratching anyone who approached.

“But Jiheon didn’t even remember me seven years ago. That’s all it took for things to turn out as they did.”

He’d hoped Jiheon might have some guilt in his heart, but Jiheon hadn’t even remembered him, which only made the hurt worse.

His revenge was complete.

He’d wanted to forget everything after that, to live out his days as a bad person for the crime he’d committed. But then he learned something unexpected.

The woman Jung Jiheon had intended to marry had a child. A new life, a daughter who had lost her father because of the incident Bae-il had caused. His long-standing hatred had ruined the lives of a woman and her child.

He felt a deep guilt and had watched over Lee Jeong-oh for a long time. Watching her slowly find happiness had brought him some peace.

He kept an eye on Jung Jiheon, too. Jiheon, despite his memory loss, seemed untroubled. Bae-il had heard that he’d grown somewhat ruthless in nature.

Jiheon’s mother was as unkind as ever. Jiheon was even close to Chae Eun-yeop and Chae Eun-bi, two notorious swindlers, unaware of what they had done to him.

So Bae-il had made a decision on his own: Jeong-oh didn’t need Jung Jiheon in her life. Jiheon would only bring her harm. He might even be a danger to her if influenced by Eun-yeop and Eun-bi. As things stood, she was happy, and that was enough.

But fate couldn’t be stopped.

Eventually, Jiheon had found Jeong-oh, and she had accepted him.

And Jiheon had changed after meeting her.

The Jiheon who had brushed past him seven years ago had returned, tilted his head in thought, and apologized for the events of 24 years ago.

At that moment, Bae-il realized how trivial his hatred had been.

All he'd ever wanted was a single word of apology, a gesture of comfort.

He also realized the terrible things he'd done, all because of that single apology he'd desired.

"So you don't have to forgive me. Don't feel obligated to say anything polite."

Bae-il spoke calmly. He wanted to smile with the same ease he'd had moments earlier, but his expression wouldn't obey.

"I'm sorry."

With Jiheon, he felt a mix of guilt and resentment, but with Jeong-oh, he was simply sorry. His apology to Jeong-oh made him feel even sorrier toward Jiheon.

"I probably won't get to see Jiheon. I came here to see both of you."

"……"

"I left a USB drive on the side table. Think of it as my way of making amends. You can give it to Jiheon."

With that, Bae-il finished speaking, grabbing his gun once more. Jeong-oh, who had been standing in a daze, took a startled step back as he approached. When she stepped aside, he was able to walk past her with a slow, steady stride.

He picked up his hat and went over to the kitchen to bow respectfully to Guk-soon.

“Ma’am, your cooking will stay with me even from far away. I’m sorry we couldn’t share a meal together.”

Seeing Guk-soon’s legs buckle as she clung to the counter, Jeong-oh quickly ran to her side. Bae-il, however, didn’t linger to witness the mother and daughter and, putting on his hat, went to the front door.

But then, the front door opened from the outside.

“Look! It’s the police officer!”

Ye-na shouted loudly.

The people entering were Ye-na, Do-bin, and Jin-seo. Jin-seo had brought Ye-na over to play.

Caught off guard, Bae-il swiftly took off his hat and held it behind him, as if hoping Ye-na wouldn’t recognize it and be shocked.

Do-bin greeted him with a loud voice.

“Hello, sir!”

“Hello.”

“Nice to see you here.”

Jin-seo greeted him warmly and then looked down to speak to Do-bin.

“Do-bin, didn’t you say you had something you wanted to tell the officer if you saw him again?”

Do-bin nodded and called out to Bae-il.

“Officer!”

“Yes, Do-bin?”

“I, uh, I ‘admile’ you, sir.”

“Hmm?”

Seeing that Bae-il didn’t seem to understand, Do-bin repeated it more clearly.

“I ‘admile’ you! Admire!”

At Do-bin’s words, Jin-seo winced, clearly embarrassed.

“Do-bin, it’s ‘admire’!”

“Oh! Right! I admire you! I want to be a police officer like you!”

“…I see. With such a strong voice, you’ll make a fine police officer.”

Bae-il patted Do-bin’s shoulder in encouragement. Just then, Ye-na shouted out too.

“Me too! Then I want to be a police officer too!”

“Ye-na wants to be a police officer too?”

Jin-seo asked, as Bae-il’s expression grew even more bewildered. Do-bin jumped up and down with excitement.

“Wow! Then we can meet up as police officers someday!”

“Yes! Let’s meet! It’s a promise!”

Ye-na made a pinky promise with Do-bin, then looked at Bae-il and said,

“Sir, I’ll come see you when I’m a police officer!”

The children’s little pinky fingers looked like red autumn leaves. As if facing the vivid colors of autumn leaves in a new season, Bae-il’s eyes

began to glisten with tears.

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Jiheon wanted to call the police but couldn't—Bae-il was a police officer, after all.

He had alerted a private security guard, but they would arrive a few minutes later than him. All he could do was get home quickly and manage the situation himself. Praying nothing would happen, Jiheon pressed harder on the gas pedal.

Upon arriving in the apartment parking lot, he immediately called Jeong-oh.

[Hello?] The drained sound of her voice heightened Jiheon's anxiety.

"Hey, Jeong-oh. Are you okay? Where's Bae-il?"

[He left.] "He left?"

[Yes, he left.] "…I see. All right, I'll be up soon."

Bae-il might have left, but it was clear that something had happened. There was a chance Bae-il was luring him to the apartment by holding Jeong-oh hostage. Uneasy thoughts flooded Jiheon's mind.

He jumped out of the car and ran towards the building entrance. Just then—

Screech!

A car that had been moving slowly nearby suddenly turned on its headlights and charged straight at him.

In that fleeting moment, every anxious thought vanished, leaving only one vivid image: the face of the woman he loved.

'Jeong-oh.'

Had he told her he loved her enough?

He’d promised her they’d never be separated again.

Crash!

Unable to withstand the blinding light, Jiheon closed his eyes.

In the blink of an eye, the two cars collided and shattered.

At the crash site, there were three men.

Ch148 - Down to the Abyss

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Sunday night.

“Let’s get rid of Jung Jiheon together. What do you say?”

Chae Eun-yeop had come all the way to Bae-il’s place to persuade him.

The person who pushed Kim Jin-goo into the reservoir had fled overseas immediately after the job. That was why the Cheolwang gang had cooperated so readily in their statement. Since Cheolwang had also suffered losses because of Eun-yeop’s business, Bae-il couldn’t touch them either.

For Eun-yeop, Kwon Bae-il was like a rope thrown down from heaven.

“If you follow my instructions, I’ll give you a billion won.”

“……”

“What do you say? Tempted?”

After listening quietly to Eun-yeop’s sly offer, Bae-il finally spoke up after a long pause.

“What exactly do you think you’re saying?”

The murderous glint in Eun-yeop’s eyes dimmed. Wrinkles creased his brow.

He thought this guy would jump at the opportunity.

But he wasn’t about to give up so easily. Eun-yeop smirked, curling one side of his lip. The gall of this guy.

“Don’t try to play innocent with me. I came here knowing everything.”

But there were some things Eun-yeop didn’t know. He was unaware that it was Kwon Bae-il himself who had earned credit for his capture.

“You look tired. Why don’t you go home and get some rest?”

Bae-il spoke gently, like a police officer coaxing a troubled youth.

The more he did, the more it made Eun-yeop grit his teeth.

“You think you’re safe? Huh?”

He yelled at Bae-il’s back as he turned to leave.

“If you don’t do it, that Jiheon bastard will kill you first!”

Bae-il’s steps halted momentarily at Eun-yeop’s sinister words. But he didn’t turn back.

Unable to contain his anger, Eun-yeop finally turned and walked away, his face twisted with rage.

***

The following evening.

Once his preparations were complete, Eun-yeop waited quietly in Jiheon’s apartment underground parking lot. Knowing Jiheon’s car made everything easy. He had secretly attached a tracker to Jiheon’s car at dawn.

He had also acquired an illegally modified car, swapped its plates, and attached tape that could cleverly cover the license plate, waiting for Jiheon.

“Kwon Bae-il, if you won’t do it, I’ll kill him.”

I have to eliminate that Jung Jiheon bastard.

Having hardly slept, he briefly nodded off but instantly reacted when the tracker alerted him that Jiheon’s car was approaching. With his eyes open, Eun-yeop glared at the parking lot entrance.

After a short wait, he saw Jiheon’s car entering the apartment parking lot. From a distance, Eun-yeop started his engine and held his position. It was easy to predict Jiheon’s path as he left his car and headed toward the apartment entrance.

There was only one chance. He’d ram into Jiheon right in front of the entrance.

Jiheon finally stepped out of his car. He seemed to be in a rush, moving quickly toward the entrance. Watching him hurry, Eun-yeop turned on his headlights, flooring the gas pedal.

Jung Jiheon, goodbye.

Vroooom!

But then—!

“What the—!”

A nearby parked car suddenly swerved in front of him.

Screech!

Crash!

Eun-yeop slammed the brakes, but it was too late. His car wouldn’t respond, spinning out of control as it crashed into the unknown vehicle.

There was no time to even scream as the two cars collided and shattered.

Jiheon saw the blinding lights speeding toward him. His body, recalling a similar accident from seven years ago, had already stiffened as though the

crash had already happened. His movements felt heavy as he braced himself.

Screech! Crash!

Everything happened in an instant.

Another car had pulled in, blocking the one coming at Jiheon and forcing it aside. With a deafening noise, the two cars collided and spun sideways.

Jiheon, forced to dodge, was flung off to the side as the two vehicles—similar in weight—smashed into each other and were nearly split in half.

Panting, Jiheon tried to catch his breath.

Barely Escaping the Abyss

Jiheon, who had narrowly avoided the accident, also took in sharp breaths, struggling to stand. Two building managers ran over, having heard the loud crash.

“There’s been an accident! Call 911!” one of the managers shouted urgently.

Jiheon looked at the car in front of him. He could make out the profile of a man slumped over the wheel. It was Chae Eun-yeop.

Then who was the person who had intervened, causing the crash?

With trembling steps, Jiheon approached the other car.

“…Su-il.”

The person inside, covered in blood and unconscious, was none other than Kwon Bae-il.

Bang, bang, bang.

“Su-il, Su-il.”

The car door wouldn’t open, crushed from the collision. Jiheon pounded on the door, but there was no response from inside. Bae-il’s face, leaning against the driver’s seat, looked strangely peaceful.

***

Jinseo, who had come to drop off Yena, was now sitting beside Jung-oh, unable to leave because she had held him back.

“What happened? Why are you like this, Jung-oh…?”

Jung-oh gripped his hand tightly, though she didn’t explain why, leaving him puzzled. Guk-soon was also staring off, looking dazed.

Jung-oh, hands shaking, couldn’t answer Jinseo right away. She had planned to accompany him after Bae-il had left, hoping to keep him safe, but couldn’t tell him the reason.

In the meantime, Jiheon called and said he would come up immediately.

“Stay a little longer. I’ll ask Jiheon to give you a ride home when he gets here.”

After hanging up, Jung-oh told Jinseo with a sigh of relief.

Jinseo didn’t know why Jung-oh and Guk-soon were so tense, but he sensed it was best to stay quiet and nodded silently.

However, the promised “immediate arrival” didn’t happen as ten minutes, then twenty minutes, passed.

Worried, Jung-oh called Jiheon, but he didn’t answer. A bad feeling crept up on her, sensing something was wrong.

“Sister, I’ll go check outside for a bit. Stay here.”

With growing anxiety, Jung-oh stepped out of the front door. Just as she entered the elevator, she heard the sound of sirens. Her heartbeat began to race.

When the elevator reached the first floor, the sirens were even louder.

“Oh my, there must’ve been an accident somewhere,” an elderly neighbor muttered as they got in, making Jung-oh even more nervous. The descent to the parking lot felt like an eternity.

Finally, the elevator doors opened to the underground parking lot.

The scene was chaotic, with a tow truck, police cars, an ambulance, and a crowd of onlookers. Amidst it all, she saw paramedics attempting to move someone.

Please, please…

“Excuse me, excuse me.”

Jung-oh, with trembling legs, moved forward, tears quickly filling her eyes.

As she approached, she saw the face of the man on the stretcher. It was Chae Eun-yeop.

Her heart dropped.

Why? Why is he here?

Then, where is my husband?

“Jung-oh.”

Just then, Jiheon appeared beside her, gently grabbing her shoulders.

The moment she saw his face, her tears spilled over.

With a short gasp, she pulled him into a tight embrace, and Jiheon comforted her.

“I was so worried… why didn’t you answer…?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Hearing his voice still slightly dazed, Jung-oh looked up at him.

“What happened? Are you hurt, too? Why is Chae Eun-yeop here?”

“There was an accident. With Chae Eun-yeop… and Bae-il.”

As soon as Jiheon answered, the paramedics managed to pull Bae-il out of the car.

Jung-oh’s face froze again.

Why… why is he like this?

She couldn’t find any words.

Just moments ago, he was smiling calmly, sharing stories from the past, and bowing in apology to me…

That was Kwon Bae-il. I was afraid of him, and I resented him, but I never wanted it to end like this.

As Jung-oh looked at the scene in shock, paramedics checked Bae-il’s consciousness and loaded him into the ambulance. Jiheon spoke to her.

“Jung-oh, I’ll go with Bae-il.”

“….”

“I’ll call you. Make sure Yena sleeps well.”

Jung-oh nodded quietly, and Jiheon immediately got into the ambulance.

***

At the hospital, Bae-il was prepped for surgery. He was taken straight into the operating room.

Jiheon waited outside the surgery room, informing Bae-il’s former colleagues about the accident. There were a few officers at Gwangjin Police

Station who were close to Bae-il, but none of them knew anything about his family.

[“Officer Kwon never mentioned his family. He didn’t seem to have a good relationship with his parents… Is he okay? I heard he submitted his resignation at the Jinju Police Station. Last Saturday.”]

A resignation letter?

It was unexpected news, and Jiheon felt even more confused.

He had rushed home, thinking Kwon Bae-il was the one responsible for a hit-and-run incident seven years ago and that he might be after Jung-oh. But instead, Bae-il had thrown himself in front of Chae Eun-yeop’s car to protect Jiheon, as if he had been prepared to die.

Did he really have that intention? Did he resign because he thought it was all over?

Why? Why would he do something like that?

Who are you, Kwon Bae-il?

Confusion filled Jiheon’s mind as he tried to piece together his memories and today’s events. He was leaning against the wall, lost in thought, when he heard a familiar voice from the end of the hallway.

“Oppa.”

It was Jung-oh, who had rushed over as soon as she put Yena to bed.

Jiheon’s unsettled gaze softened, like a lost person finding a guide through a maze. He embraced Jung-oh, and though he held her, he felt like he was the one being held.

In that moment, when he thought he was facing the last moment of his life again, Jiheon had only thought of one person. And he always would.

Losing you is far scarier to me than losing myself.

“Are you okay, Oppa?”

Jung-oh, resting gently in his arms, pulled back slightly to caress his face.

“I’m okay.”

“You’re not hurt?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“There’s no pain anywhere?”

Seeing the love in her eyes, Jiheon felt life’s reality sink in. Instead of answering, he smiled and made a request.

“Jung-oh, let’s get married.”

“We already are.”

“I mean a wedding.”

“….”

“I want to see it.”

“….”

“You, Lee Jung-oh, in a wedding dress.”

In that intense moment of light, he felt a wave of regret. They had never had a wedding ceremony. He had imagined her countless times in a wedding dress, but he had never actually seen it. It saddened him.

Whatever our last moment looks like, I know I’ll feel regret for you.

Realizing that, he felt this very moment of love was a miracle.

“I love you.”

Jung-oh was suddenly moved to tears by his unexpected confession. She didn't respond with words, fearing her voice would betray her emotions, and simply buried herself in Jiheon's arms again.

***

Much later, after emerging from Jiheon's embrace, Jung-oh asked about Bae-il.

"How's Officer Kwon? How badly is he hurt?"

"I don't know yet. He's still in surgery, and I haven't heard anything."

"…."

"Chae Eun-yeop's car swerved toward me, and Bae-il's car intervened… He threw himself in as if he was trying to protect me…."

Jiheon couldn't bring himself to say more, and Jung-oh felt her heart ache as she watched him.

After nine hours, the surgery was over. The operation had gone well, but they'd have to monitor his recovery. Bae-il was moved to the intensive care unit.

Back home, Jiheon remained silent. Jung-oh handed him a USB that Bae-il had left behind. She didn't know what it contained.

"Officer Kwon left this at our place. He said to give it to you."

Jiheon immediately brought out his laptop to examine the files on the USB.

Inside, there were several files.

Jiheon clicked on the first video file. As soon as the video started playing, Jung-oh gasped and covered her mouth with both hands.

It was a video of Jiheon's accident from seven years ago. The footage showed Kwon Bae-il getting out of his car after hitting Jiheon and walking

toward him.

But Jiheon and Bae-il weren’t the only ones in the video. There was one more person hidden by the emergency stairs.

“Wait, isn’t that Chae Eun-bi?”

Jung-oh pointed toward the person lurking by the emergency stairs. Despite witnessing everything, Kim Jin-goo had lied and claimed Jiheon was the hit-and-run driver, all to take Jiheon’s place.

Jiheon calmly watched the rest of the video, as if it were a distant event, and then clicked on the next video. This one included audio.

The video showed a hospital room. For some reason, the room felt strangely familiar, and Jiheon furrowed his brow.

“This is the hospital room where I was admitted seven years ago.”

Recalling the memory, Jiheon spoke to Jung-oh.

“Seven years ago? Officer Kwon had this file too?”

Jung-oh asked in surprise at Jiheon’s explanation. He couldn’t answer her question because a more horrifying and shocking voice began to echo from the video.

[“Start eliminating memories one by one, beginning with the closest. Just like lighting a match to burn the brain. Everything in the path of the flame will disappear. Memories of trips, memories of military service, memories of meeting new people. Set fire to all those memories… because they’re unnecessary. Because they’re useless.”]

Ugh…

Jiheon placed a hand over his chest. He was having trouble breathing. It felt like Chae Eun-yeop’s voice coming through the laptop was squeezing his throat tight.

“Oppa… are you okay?”

Jung-oh’s voice, right next to him, sounded distant. It felt like his heart was turning to stone.

Into the abyss, into the abyss.

It was as if endless darkness was trying to swallow him whole.

Ch149 - The Courage to Forgive

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“Oppa.”

Jiheon lay there, seemingly unconscious and breathing heavily, when Jung-oh shook him and called out.

Haaah!

Only then did Jiheon seem to regain consciousness, gasping and blinking his eyes open.

Chae Eun-yeop’s image and voice…

Was it because of Chae Eun-yeop that I lost my memories?

Did Chae Eun-yeop manipulate my memories?

Jiheon shook his head.

He couldn’t definitively say it was Chae Eun-yeop’s doing. She wasn’t a magician, and one hypnosis session wouldn’t make him lose his memories. It must have been a series of unfortunate events.

Jiheon clicked on the next video. This one was similar but showed Chae Eun-yeop in different clothes, indicating it was on another day. The next three videos followed the same pattern, revealing that Chae Eun-yeop had attempted hypnosis multiple times.

…Was my life, my memories, destroyed by someone’s manipulation?

He found it hard to believe, and the realization left him feeling hollow, as if his mind and body had become paralyzed.

For the past seven years, without Jung-oh by his side, Jiheon had led a dull life. He had no dreams, nothing precious to hold onto, and thus wasn't truly happy.

He thought it was inevitable since he had always lived that way. Losing three years' worth of memories but not even considering retrieving them was a natural outcome, given how unremarkable his life felt.

Jiheon began to recall the story he had heard from Ham Dae-geun.

"Ham Dae-geun said something like this: Chae Eun-yeop is studying hypnosis to manipulate clients."

"…"

"The moment I heard that, my head started to ache…"

Jung-oh leaned over and hugged Jiheon tightly, as if to encompass his pain, silently understanding without needing more words.

With his emotions settled in Jung-oh's embrace, Jiheon clicked on the next video. The video was dated last Sunday.

It seemed to have been filmed at night; everything was dark around, and Chae Eun-yeop's voice could be heard.

["Let's get rid of Jeong Ji-heon together. How about it? If you just do what I say, I'll give you 1 billion won. Sounds tempting, doesn't it?"]
["What on earth are you talking about?"]
["Don't play dumb. I know everything."]
["You look tired; you should go home and rest."]
["Do you really think you'll be safe? If you can't handle this, Jiheon will kill you first!"]

It was a conversation between Eun-yeop and Bae-il. As Bae-il didn't cooperate with her plans, Eun-yeop provoked him even more. The horrific

content of the conversation made Jung-oh clench her fists, trembling.

“Bae-il… knew that Chae Eun-yeop was coming to kill me. He knew everything and still intervened…”

“…Officer Kwon came to our house and told us everything. He was the one responsible for the hit-and-run accident seven years ago and the one who tried to lure Ye-na.”

“Why? Didn’t he explain why?”

“…They say that 24 years ago, your mother put pressure on Officer Kwon’s mother. So he transferred from Seoul to a provincial area. His mother worked hard at her new job and passed away.”

Jung-oh carefully conveyed what she had heard from Bae-il.

Jiheon sighed deeply.

“It seemed like he regretted and reflected on the things he had done. I think his desire to protect you stemmed from that guilt he felt back then.”

But still, that was not enough.

He should have reported it. He could have warned that Chae Eun-yeop might do something bad.

“If he had, you and our entire family would have been uneasy all this time. You would have had a hard time keeping tabs on Chae Eun-yeop from multiple angles.”

Kwon Bae-il must have known that too.

Some conflicts can only be proven and resolved once the pus bursts and the blood is acknowledged.

Living life can be such great agony for someone who knows everything.

After a while, Jiheon, who had lost his words, clicked on the final file with difficulty.

The last file was a note. It was a short letter left by Bae-il for Jiheon.

“Jiheon…”

“I resented you a lot back then. That’s why I ruined your life.

I can’t turn back time, but I’ll set things right as best I can now.

I’ve already handed all the materials over to the police. They will help you.”

The short, straightforward letter without a single word of apology felt like a knife piercing Jiheon’s heart.

By saying he had turned everything over to the police, it meant he was taking responsibility for the traffic accident he caused seven years ago.

“So that’s why he resigned…” Jiheon muttered in a dazed voice.

***

Bae-il spent several days in the intensive care unit.

His life as Yoo Soo-il, living as Kwon Bae-il, must have been extremely burdensome, as no family members came to visit him. Currently, contact had been established with his stepmother, Bae-il’s aunt, but all she did was sigh without even promising to visit.

Eun-yeop was in another hospital. She, too, was reported to be unconscious, and it seemed it would be better if she didn’t wake up, as the world had been cruel to her.

The police had discovered over 5 billion won in cash that Eun-yeop had hidden in Incheon, and two members of the National Assembly who had received money from her were also being investigated.

Additionally, how Eun-yeop's attempted murder charges leaked to the press became a fast-breaking news story. People mocked Eun-yeop, who was unable to wake up, saying that she was trying to kill someone while sleeping peacefully.

Because of the reporters, Eun-bi and her mother seemed unable to visit Eun-yeop in the hospital.

Jung-oh was worried about Eun-bi.

"She's not even alone. The world gives such immense trials."

Huuuh…

"So, will the ground swallow me up?"

National Assemblyman Kook-soon chimed in as Jung-oh frequently let out heavy sighs. Sitting at the kitchen counter with her chin propped up, Jung-oh munched on the food her mother had prepared while complaining.

"Mom, I wanted to be like you, but I have to admit that I'm just a bad person."

She had wanted to be a generous person like her mother, but she couldn't help but feel resentment building up inside her.

Even though Kwon Bae-il had sacrificed himself to save her husband, it was hard to feel only gratitude.

My seven years, my husband's seven years, and Ye-na's seven years.

It was infuriating that Bae-il had kept quiet all along despite knowing everything from the beginning. So, even though his life was pitiable, she couldn't just feel sorry for him.

"It's easy to be angry, but why is it so hard to feel? Even though it's free, it's still difficult, Mom."

“How can feeling be free? You’re bearing all the consequences that come after.”

Kook-soon replied, seeming to understand Jung-oh’s lament.

“But can you hate him?”

“…”

“Can you really hate him?”

But soon came the follow-up question. Her mother knew that her daughter didn’t have it in her to hate someone deeply. Even though Jung-oh had said she didn’t seem to resemble her mother’s personality, her mother knew there was no one who resembled her more than Jung-oh did.

Jung-oh slumped her shoulders, looking unsure, and confessed her feelings.

“There are parts I can’t forgive. I’m still human.”

“That’s true.”

“…But there’s not a single good thing about my anger.”

“…”

“Feeling hatred doesn’t bring relief. It just continues to hurt, Mom.”

Although Bae-il’s life was pitiful, she still found him despicable, and his tragic life only caused her more pain.

“I, who have always felt secure and happy because of you, how could I ever understand the heart of someone who has lost their mother?”

Through someone else’s misfortune, one realizes their own happiness. Even knowing that feeling this way isn’t right, it’s simply human nature.

“Mom, I love you.”

Suddenly, the thought struck her that she was living such a happy life, and she confessed her love to Kook-soon. At her daughter's unexpected confession, Kook-soon's nose flared, and her eyes widened, as if she had just heard a serenade from a pig.

"Why are we talking about this? You should say that to your husband more!"

"If a daughter risks embarrassment to say it, can't you accept it a bit more nicely? I love you enough to take that risk, Mom. Huh?"

"Alright, enough!"

Kook-soon raised her voice, not sounding like herself at all. Eventually, she dropped the spatula she had been holding and turned away to open the sink cabinet for no reason.

Jung-oh quickly chased after her and looked into her face.

"Hey? Ms. Kook-soon, are you crying?"

"I'm not crying!"

"Looks like you're crying."

Jung-oh teased her mother while pulling her into a tight hug. Kook-soon twisted her body away, as if annoyed.

"Get off me. It's gross."

"Mom, I love you. I love you. I love you."

"Stop it!"

Kook-soon couldn't hold back her embarrassment and shouted when the phone rang. It was a call from the hospital.

***

Bae-il opened his eyes after five days. It felt like he had been dreaming for a long time, but he couldn’t remember the contents of the dream. His body felt surprisingly light. It was a bit strenuous, but he was able to converse reasonably well.

After being moved from the intensive care unit to a general ward and undergoing various tests, it was already evening. The doctor remarked that his recovery was miraculously fast. He casually asked if there was no guardian present, to which the nurse replied that a friend had been visiting him continuously.

The new room was a VIP ward. Upon seeing the room, Bae-il couldn’t help but think of Jiheon.

As expected, Jung-oh came to visit around dinner time.

“Jiheon will be here soon.”

Jung-oh spoke as if anticipating that Bae-il would ask first.

She spoke dryly, deliberately not smiling. In fact, Jung-oh had come with a purpose. She felt she needed to vent her feelings to genuinely care for him.

“I can’t say thank you.”

She put on a stern expression, even omitting the usual question about his health. Although she had asked the nurse about his condition beforehand to avoid asking that question.

“Inspector, you wore that hat, didn’t you?”

She pointed out something that needed addressing.

On the Monday when Bae-il visited Jung-oh’s house and confessed everything, he had worn a hat—the same hat worn by the woman who had tried to kidnap Ye-na.

At Jung-oh’s comment, Bae-il’s eyes widened.

“You were trying to scare me! Do you think I wouldn’t know?”

That’s why Jung-oh felt resentment towards Bae-il. Even though he had come to apologize, wearing that hat made it hard for her to understand his intentions, leaving her mind in turmoil.

“Then you just suddenly apologize and tell me not to forgive you, all while risking your life to make amends. How low of you.”

“…”

“Inspector, you’re too unilateral.”

He had judged her life according to his own standards.

He had fabricated the kidnapping incident to frighten her, thinking Jiheon wouldn’t be needed by Jung-oh.

He had known everything about the events seven years ago but kept it hidden.

However, considering his life, she could understand that too. He must have been unable to share his thoughts with anyone, leading him to think and judge alone. How could she wholly hate someone who had been so lonely and tormented?

Jung-oh, who had been straining her eyes, eventually lowered her head. She felt a wave of nausea, and the thought of shouting at him only made her heart ache more.

“…I’m sorry for criticizing you right away. You must still be in a lot of pain.”

“…”

“Actually, forgiving someone requires as much courage as saying sorry…”

Her voice came out quietly.

“I forgive everything. And I’m sorry too…”

“…”

“And I’m very grateful for saving Jiheon. But please, don’t throw yourself into someone else’s affairs again. Recover quickly, stay healthy, and live life to the fullest. Do you understand?”

“…”

“Also, make a beautiful family. Since you’re good-looking, any kids you have will surely be beautiful like you.”

Tears glistened in her eyes, but Bae-il smiled as if he found it interesting to watch her.

Suddenly, Jung-oh felt worried about his condition.

“Why are you just smiling and not saying anything? Can you not speak?”

Just as Jung-oh got up from her chair and stepped closer to Bae-il, the door opened, and Jiheon entered.

Ch150 - Is the Flower Rain Falling?

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The Chae Eun-yeob case, along with the charges of instigating murder and attempted murder against her, had been covered extensively in the news, so Young-mi had heard about it too.

The attempted murder charge was related to her son Jiheon. She had heard that Chae Eun-yeob had tried to kill Jiheon but ended up crashing into another car.

Her son had nearly died, and she wanted to check on him, to hear his voice, but she couldn't contact him.

Fortunately, her husband occasionally updated her on Jiheon's condition. She had learned that her son was uninjured and was continuing to work healthily at his company.

"But the child who saved Jiheon got seriously hurt. His name is Kwon Bae-il, and he seems to be an old friend of Jiheon's."

"…What's the name again?"

"Kwon Bae-il. I think they were friends in elementary school? Why? Do you know that name?"

At Jaekwang's question, Young-mi's heart began to race.

She rummaged through old documents. She felt like she had jotted something down in a notebook somewhere…

‘Ah…’

In an old notebook, she found the names Yoo Soo-il and Kwon Bae-il.

Yoo Soo-il. He was a child who used to hang out with Jiheon when he was nine years old and taking classes for gifted Go players. She didn’t like that boy, so she had called his mother to ask her to keep their sons apart.

That mother had relayed the message to Soo-il, and he, in turn, had told Jiheon. Jiheon had gotten very angry. Young-mi couldn’t help but be furious as well.

Young-mi had gone to the restaurant where Yoo Soo-il’s mother worked and had harassed her. She colluded with the restaurant owner to get her kicked out. After that, Yoo Soo-il’s mother found a job at another nearby restaurant but didn’t stay long and eventually moved to the countryside.

Although she felt relieved that she had successfully kept her son away from Yoo Soo-il, there was a lingering unease. The last time she had seen that boy’s mother, her expression hadn’t been good, and it had stayed in Young-mi’s mind. About a year later, she had tried to find out about Yoo Soo-il.

In the meantime, a significant event had occurred in Yoo Soo-il’s life. His mother had passed away from illness, and he had been adopted by his aunt and given a new name.

That name was Kwon Bae-il.

As Young-mi gripped the notebook, her hands began to tremble.

Why had Kwon Bae-il tried to save Jiheon?

Just then, she felt a throbbing pain in her head, and a drop of blood fell onto the name Kwon Bae-il. Young-mi hurriedly pressed a tissue to her nose.

She experienced nosebleeds at least once a day, and they didn’t stop easily.

Am I going to die…?

Amidst all this, she was still a mother, worrying about her son’s safety.

Is Jiheon okay?

***

Entering the hospital room, Jiheon stared blankly at Jung-oh, who was closely approaching Bae-il.

“What are you doing?”

Jiheon was incredulous at Jung-oh’s narrowed eyes.

I mean, he had come to see the face of his friend who had been in a car accident, yet he looked as if he had come to catch a cheating wife.

“I… I thought you weren’t talking. I was wondering if you couldn’t speak…”

“Bae-il, are you okay?”

Jiheon approached Bae-il and asked, responding to Jung-oh’s retort.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

This was the first time Bae-il spoke. This time, Jung-oh’s mouth dropped open in disbelief at Bae-il’s reaction.

“You’re talking now?”

“No, you didn’t say a word earlier.”

“You must have scared him.”

“Oh, come on. Seriously, come on….”

It annoyed Jung-oh that it felt like Bae-il and Jiheon were conspiring to tease him, but he couldn’t get mad at someone who was injured. He decided to step aside to let the two talk.

After Jung-oh left, Jiheon spoke up after a while.

“They said the surgery went well… How do you feel?”

“Not bad.”

“Good. That’s all that matters.”

Jiheon sat in the spot where Jung-oh had been. When their eyes met, Bae-il turned away, seemingly embarrassed.

“You messed up.”

“…”

“You should have valued yourself more.”

So you’re starting by scolding me too.

Jiheon’s way of speaking was similar to Jung-oh’s. Bae-il ended up smiling again. Unbeknownst to him, Jiheon continued to talk.

“If you had really messed up, it would have been a lot more painful than it was seven years ago. This time, you remember everything.”

I see.

If I had left this world, you would have been more hurt.

His friend was scolding him based on the assumption that he had made a mistake, but Bae-il found those words strangely comforting. The thought that someone could suffer for him, that someone was grateful he was alive, felt oddly reassuring.

“I had no idea my mother had gone to such lengths. I had no idea you had been through something like that either.”

“…”

“I’m sorry. Really.”

“It’s fine.”

Hearing Jiheon apologize again, Bae-il shook his head this time. He had finally come to acknowledge his own mistakes. He was finally able to correct the past.

“I was just too young. I felt like I had to blame someone to survive.”

Even after you and I parted ways, so much happened, and I remembered you in all those circumstances. I thought it was the only way I could endure.

Hatred can be a source of strength.

Maybe that hatred was what had kept him alive until now. So perhaps it was Jung Jiheon and his mother who had saved him.

“I chose you because I needed someone to hate.”

At Bae-il’s answer, Jiheon’s heart ached, and he furrowed his brow. He didn’t know how to face someone who recognized their mistakes without any minimal defense of themselves.

“The police said they would handle it according to protocol… You might not be able to continue with your job at the police station.”

After a long pause, Jiheon spoke again.

“But I’ll do everything I can. I’ve already said it. I don’t want any punishment.”

“…”

“However, it involves not only me but also Kim Jin-goo, so I don’t know what the outcome will be.”

“You don’t have to strain yourself.”

Bae-il answered as if he had already resigned himself to the situation. This made Jiheon feel even more pain.

While trying to admonish him not to speak as if he had given up on everything, his phone rang. It was the lawyer he had hired to resolve Bae-il's matters. Reluctantly, Jiheon stood up.

"I'll take this call for a moment."

As Jiheon left the hospital room, a little later, the door creaked open again, and Jung-oh entered. It was amusing for Bae-il to see the couple alternately appearing like part-time workers.

"…You can talk?"

He had thought it was funny, but at Jung-oh's reprimand, Bae-il couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"No, you can't laugh! You'll open your stitches!"

Jung-oh rushed to stop Bae-il.

Just a few minutes facing her made Bae-il think he could understand why Jung Jiheon had changed so much.

First, he needed to clarify something about the incident.

"Wearing that hat on Monday didn't mean anything. I just grabbed whatever was at hand, and I only realized that after you mentioned it, Jung Jiheon."

"Oh my gosh!"

As Bae-il acknowledged his mistake, Jung-oh flared her nostrils in disbelief. The sight was so amusing that Bae-il couldn't help but smile.

He realized that everyone could make mistakes.

The fact that Jiheon didn’t recognize him seven years ago at the flower shop didn’t mean he had completely forgotten him.

Thinking of the tragedy born from misunderstandings made him feel profoundly ashamed.

Fate, or bad luck, was something he could have changed.

If only he had reached out to Jung Jiheon first at that flower shop.

If he had congratulated him on his proposal and suggested they get together to play a game of Go like they used to.

“I’m sorry.”

Bae-il apologized again for his past mistakes. Jung-oh was right.

He had judged everything on his own accord. He was too consumed by darkness to see ahead.

“I measured your happiness with my own standards.”

But in the end, you broke free from the framework I had planned and found your own happiness. So wonderfully.

You faced down any misfortune without yielding…

“Right now, flowers…”

Bae-il was about to ask something when he suddenly felt awkward and quickly closed his mouth.

“Living seems to be a suffering… If suffering just piles on suffering, everything will collapse, but sometimes, under someone’s sorrow, stars twinkle, and flower petals fall. That’s why I can’t give up.”

She had said something like that once. It was when she was contemplating whether to tell Jiheon about Ye-na’s existence.

Even amid unbearable pain, Jung-oh was enduring it all while waiting for the flower petals to fall.

“Is the flower shower falling now? The one you’ve been waiting for.”

There was no need to ask.

Seeing that your butterfly, which had been flapping its wings so diligently, has finally returned…

No, she hadn’t just been waiting for the flower shower. It seemed she had cultivated her own flower garden, inviting the butterflies to come.

“Excuse me? Flowers?”

Just a moment ago, Jung-oh had been interrogating Bae-il, but now, curious about his unfinished thought, she stood up from her chair.

Knock, knock, knock.

Just as Jung-oh approached Bae-il again, there was a sound of knocking. It was Jiheon tapping on the open door.

Jiheon, who had walked in, glared at Jung-oh before turning to Bae-il.

“Bae-il, I’m leaving now. I’ll come again tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to come.”

“I will come.”

It was a strangely affectionate yet somewhat cold farewell. Jung-oh was caught by Jiheon’s hand and was unable to say goodbye properly as she left the hospital room. Bae-il didn’t see them smiling at each other as they departed.

As Jiheon walked silently toward the parking lot, he asked, “Is Bae-il really that good-looking?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You said earlier that Bae-il is good-looking, so the kids would probably be cute. Out of nowhere.”

Jung-oh blinked for a long time before recalling the memory.

Wait, is he sulking over that casual compliment? What a childish guy.

“Is he really that good-looking?”

“What do you want to hear? I think you’re better-looking.”

“…”

“You’re the best-looking guy. I’m living with the most handsome man in the world.”

“Right. If you know that, don’t talk about other guys being good-looking.”

Jung-oh sighed heavily before bursting into laughter.

Bae-il would probably never know. This guy, who spoke so maturely in front of his old friend, was actually the most childish guy in the world.

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After her father was laid to rest, Eun-bi heard about her brother’s accident the next day. Initially thinking it was an unexpected accident, she learned that her brother was the main culprit behind it. He had tried to hit Jiheon with his car, but the waiting police officers had been the ones to suffer instead.

Her brother was now facing charges of conspiracy to commit murder and attempted murder. With the discovery of hidden slush funds, he was sure to face prison time. It seemed better for him to not wake up for a few years.

With their family in shambles, Eun-bi was the only sane one left.

She persuaded her distraught mother.

“Mom, let’s move to the U.S. I’ll take care of everything.”

“What about your brother?”

“We can come back to check on him sometimes. Once he recovers, he’ll go straight to prison. He can’t stay near you.”

At first, her mother firmly refused, but as time passed, she began to grasp the reality of the situation. She wanted to protect her son, but due to the harsh public sentiment, she couldn’t go near him.

Turning away, her mother finally noticed her daughter, who had been caring for herself. The daughter she had thought was an oddity in the family was holding her ground more steadfastly than anyone. Now she felt she needed to look after her daughter at the very least.

“Alright. Let’s go. We need to leave this place.”

With her mother’s decision, Eun-bi began preparations for their emigration.

Whenever anxiety struck, she would gently rub her belly. Since collapsing in front of Jung-oh, she hadn’t been to the hospital again. The overwhelming events had left her with no time to worry about her child. But somehow, it had become a habit to touch her belly and speak to the baby.

“Are you doing well in there?”

Although she hadn’t checked, Eun-bi had a feeling that her baby was growing healthily. This belief had become her source of strength. Knowing that there was someone who depended on her completely was empowering.

While she was in the midst of preparing for emigration, the police contacted her. They informed her that there were investigations related to Jung Jiheon.

Eun-bi went to the police station. The officer waiting for her greeted her.

“What kind of investigation do I need to undergo?”

“I have something to show you.”

As the officer turned on the laptop, Eun-bi asked, “Is the police officer who collided with my brother alright?”

“He woke up the day before yesterday.”

“That’s a relief.”

Eun-bi nodded quietly, grateful that the officer was alive and that her brother hadn’t harmed anyone further.

Without reacting to Eun-bi’s response, the officer presented a video to her.

“Please check this video.”

As she watched, Eun-bi’s eyes widened. It was footage from seven years ago, captured by the black box in her car. It recorded the moment Jiheon had his accident.

“How is this possible…?”

She had thought it was lost forever, no matter how hard she searched for it.

How did this end up in the police’s hands?

“Who had this?”

“Do you remember anything about this incident?”

Ignoring her answer completely, the officer asked in a businesslike manner. Eun-bi examined the video again.

However, there was something visible now that hadn’t been seen seven years ago.

The man who caused the accident. The true culprit’s face…

“Wait a minute. This person….”

Although it was just a blurry silhouette, Eun-bi knew exactly who it was. She couldn’t possibly forget.

Noticing Eun-bi’s reaction, the officer asked, “Do you know Officer Kwon Bae-il?”

Kwon Bae-il?

He had said he was just an office worker, hadn’t he?

“…Are you saying this person is a police officer?”

Ch151 - Karma

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When Seung-kyu came home early from work, he was greeted by three excited children.

“Daddy!”

“Daddy!”

“Uncle!”

Dobin, Doyun, and then Yena. While he was happy to see their energetic cheers, he also felt a bit overwhelmed.

After greeting each child, Seung-kyu headed to the kitchen.

“I’m back.”

“You’re back early.”

Jinseo, busy preparing dinner, glanced over and replied. Seung-kyu rolled up his sleeves and approached his wife.

“Is there anything I can help with?”

“Go play with the kids.”

“That’s a little scary.”

“Just read them a book or something.”

Reluctantly, Seung-kyu gathered his nervous energy and called the kids over. The moment he mentioned reading a book, they chirped excitedly like sparrows.

Though he often struggled, Seung-kyu was a good dad. Unlike Jinseo, who constantly tried to teach the kids, he knew how to play at their level.

He was even better at reading than their mom. With various voices, he brought the story to life, which the kids loved.

“In 1820, a girl was born in Florence, Italy.”

The children, who had been chirping like sparrows, quieted down as they absorbed Seung-kyu’s voice. Jinseo smiled contentedly.

However, what had been a warm moment quickly turned into chaos. As Jinseo continued preparing dinner, the living room erupted into tears.

“Waaah!”

“Why are you crying? Why?”

Hearing Dobin’s loud wails, Jinseo rushed into the living room. Dobin, Doyun, and Yena were all crying sorrowfully, as if they had lost a country.

Amidst them, Seung-kyu was holding the smallest, Doyun, and trying to calm him down while sweating profusely. Jinseo yelled.

“Why did you make them cry?”

“I didn’t make them cry! It was the nightingale that made them cry.”

As soon as Seung-kyu replied, Dobin clung to Jinseo’s leg and shook it.

“Mom! The nightingale died!”

It seemed Seung-kyu had been reading a biography. Jinseo stroked Dobin’s head and responded.

“That’s right. It passed away a long time ago.”

“Waaah! Why did it have to go?”

“Everyone dies. Your mom will die, your dad will die, and even you, Dobin, will die someday.”

Waaah!

At Jinseo’s rational answer, Dobin’s cries grew even louder.

“I don’t want to die!”

“That’s right. Everyone wants to live. No one wants to die.”

As Dobin conversed with Jinseo, Yena also wailed alongside them. Jinseo hugged Yena tightly and turned her head up to Dobin.

“That’s why you need to live your life to the fullest while you can, okay? Brush your teeth well.”

“If I brush my teeth well, won’t I die?”

“You’ll probably live longer than if you don’t brush your teeth.”

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

Caught up in Jinseo’s little lesson, Dobin nodded vigorously and wiped his tears.

“Yena, you should brush your teeth well too. Let’s live a long time together.”

“Okay. It’s a promise.”

Fortunately, the children’s crying didn’t last long. Both Seung-kyu and Jinseo secretly sighed in relief.

“Alright, now that you’ve cried enough, let’s eat.”

Jinseo skillfully led the children to the kitchen.

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Jeong-oh and Jiheon visited the hypnosis therapy center after a long time.

Jiheon opened up to the doctor about the recorded file from seven years ago that Bae-il had handed him.

“The aversion to hypnosis could stem from that experience,” the doctor commented after hearing the story.

“Knowing the cause doesn’t mean the memories will come back, though. I still can’t remember anything from my military days, and I can’t recall any moments from my dating period either.”

“It might just be that time has caused those memories to fade away.”

“That could be true. I want to remember everything, but the feeling of powerlessness when things don’t go as expected is overwhelming.”

Jeong-oh also felt a heaviness in her heart at Jiheon’s confession. Since discovering what Eun-yeob had done seven years ago, Jiheon seemed to be having nightmares from time to time. Watching him, Jeong-oh felt unsettled as well.

But the doctor had a different reaction.

“There may be subconscious pressures at play, but you have acknowledged your feelings of helplessness, Jiheon. It seems that your heart is gradually finding stability.”

I never thought of it that way.

Jeong-oh felt a sense of relief as she listened to the doctor’s positive interpretation.

Her husband was fighting hard to overcome this. She decided to trust him and wait patiently.

After parting ways with Jiheon, who had a lot on his plate, Jeong-oh went to Dobin’s house. When she arrived to pick up Yena, the kids had just finished eating.

As Yena was getting ready to go home, Jinseo whispered to Jeong-oh.

“Um, Yena might say something unexpected.”

Jinseo shared everything about the incident that led the kids to burst into tears before dinner.

“I was too serious with my words.”

“No, thank you for explaining it in a way that Yena could understand, unni.”

Even though the topic was serious, as time passed and Jeong-oh listened to the context, she found the children’s reactions amusing and adorable, making her smile.

As they left Dobin’s house, holding hands on the way home, Jeong-oh casually asked Yena,

“Did you feel sad reading about the nightingale today?”

“Yeah. I was sad that the nightingale died.”

“Are you okay now?”

“Yeah. I’m okay.”

“……”

“Mom, we all die.”

“……That’s true.”

“So, Mom, it’s happy and thankful that you and I are alive like this, right?”

Jeong-oh’s eyes welled up at her child’s thoughtful sentiment.

“Yeah. That’s right.”

When you realize that death is a natural part of life, living feels miraculous.

“Especially, Mom is really happy and grateful to have met Yena. I’m glad that Yena is Mom’s daughter.”

The warmth in the small hand she held grew stronger.

There are so many positive influences close by.

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After dropping Yena off at home, Jeong-oh immediately headed out again. The police had contacted her several times, but she hadn’t been able to visit due to work. Gathering her documents, she made her way to the police station.

As she approached the entrance of the police station, Jeong-oh’s eyes narrowed. She recognized someone slumped over near the entrance.

Carefully approaching, Jeong-oh stepped back in surprise when Eun-bi suddenly turned her head.

“Mom! You startled me!”

Eun-bi glared at Jeong-oh without saying a word, as if to ask why she was there.

“I came to withdraw the complaint.”

Jeong-oh reluctantly revealed her purpose.

She and Jiheon had decided to drop the complaint. They also agreed to overlook the false testimony from the accident seven years ago. Although Eun-bi wouldn’t feel sorry or grateful, they made that decision knowing her difficult circumstances.

Eun-bi remained silent, seemingly in disbelief. Or perhaps she was frozen, unsure of how to respond. Jeong-oh cautiously approached again. Stripped of her hatred, the sight of Eun-bi seemed frail and pitiful, much like Kwon Bae-il.

“…Are you okay?”

The question slipped out naturally.

At that seemingly trivial question, Eun-bi shed thick tears.

That wasn’t her intention, but Jeong-oh became even more flustered by Eun-bi’s reaction. She hurriedly rummaged through her bag, thinking she should offer a tissue, but found none.

Noticing Jeong-oh’s awkward behavior, Eun-bi spoke.

“I envy you.”

Jeong-oh’s hands froze as she searched through her bag.

The cold tone, devoid of laughter, made her sincerity stand out more clearly. To extend a hand to an enemy takes courage and composure. Eun-bi envied Jeong-oh’s situation, where she could maintain such composure.

“I envied you too.”

“……”

“But that doesn’t mean I want to be you. I didn’t want that 13 years ago either.”

Jeong-oh opened up sincerely.

In response to Jeong-oh’s confession, Eun-bi replied coldly.

“I don’t want to say sorry to you. I’ve just been living my best.”

However, there was no strength in her voice, and Jeong-oh felt no animosity. On the contrary, she felt anxious as Eun-bi seemed so fragile. It felt like she could disappear just like her fading voice.

And as expected, Eun-bi continued.

“But I feel like…”

“……”

“I feel like I should die.”

Eun-bi was completely broken.

Seven years ago, false testimony about Jeong Jiheon’s accident led to an innocent person being labeled as a hit-and-run driver, which ultimately resulted in her older brother killing someone. The father of the child growing inside her was the man who reported her brother.

The father, who was expected to become the Chief Justice, could not bear the shame and left this world. Meanwhile, Eun-bi’s brother attempted to kill Jeong Jiheon but ended up running into the father of her child instead.

There must have been happy moments in the past, but now Eun-bi couldn’t recall any of them. All she held was despair. Living felt like hell, and dying didn’t seem like a big deal.

Tears fell helplessly from her eyes and dripped onto her hand. Jeong-oh, who had been sitting beside her, moved closer and grasped Eun-bi’s hand. Eun-bi’s tears soaked into Jeong-oh’s palm.

“Cha Eun-bi. Don’t be weak.”

Jeong-oh said, lifting her head to look at Eun-bi.

“It’s okay. I don’t need an apology. Of course, I would like one, but my greed shouldn’t harm you.”

Jeong-oh didn’t wish for this kind of ending either. She had only imagined Eun-bi crying and giving a heartfelt apology, but she never wished for her spirit to be shattered by that pain.

“This too shall pass. You’ll overcome it and be okay. There will come a moment when you’ll be thankful just to be alive.”

I hated you, but I don’t want you to give up on life. I want you to overcome everything!

“I know because I’ve lived as a single mother for seven years. As hard as it is, it’s also rewarding. I feel proud of myself. Things that seemed hopeless can eventually turn into happiness.”

On days when the outside world frustrates her to no end, there are times when she wants to frown but has to smile because of her child. That forced smile eventually became a genuine expression of her feelings. That’s why, at some point, she was able to say she was happy.

You will come to know that kind of life too. Someday, you will be happy just to be alive.

“You can do it. You will do well.”

Her clear voice quivered. Looking up at Jeong-oh, Eun-bi’s face was contorted with emotion. She appeared as a fragile woman that Jeong-oh just wanted to embrace and comfort.

Eun-bi ultimately couldn’t hold back her emotions and burst into tears.

Eun-bi’s crying continued for a long time. Jeong-oh couldn’t embrace and comfort her, but she quietly stayed by her side.

“If you need my help, just say so. I’ll help you with anything I can.”

As Eun-bi’s tears began to subside, Jeong-oh spoke.

After a long hesitation, Eun-bi made a request to Jeong-oh. It would be her first and last request.

“……Can you help me meet someone?”

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The next afternoon, Jeong-oh visited Bae-il in the hospital.

“Hello. How have you been?”

Bae-il blinked in surprise at the sudden visit before answering.

“I’m getting better.”

“Jiheon didn’t come. I came alone today.”

Jeong-oh approached and explained her purpose.

“Actually, someone wants to see you, but I can’t bring them without asking for your opinion first. I received a note.”

As Jeong-oh handed him the note, Bae-il’s expression grew heavy as he looked down at it. He had an idea of who might be asking.

After delivering the note, Jeong-oh left immediately. Once she was gone, Bae-il unfolded the note.

As expected, the note was from the person he had anticipated.

“Dear Kwon Bae-il, this is Cha Eun-bi.

I’m pregnant. You know well how the child will look.”

However, the unexpected content made his heart sink.

Ch152 - Could There Have Been a Different Beginning?

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“If you can’t believe the facts, I can prove it. These days, paternity tests can be done using a pregnant woman’s blood,” she had said.

Bae-il read and reread the few lines of the letter.

So, there was a child.

That couldn’t be true.

No… thinking about it, he couldn’t be so sure. It seemed there had been a mistake once before.

If that were the case, then the child must have grown quite a bit by now.

He had submitted his resignation and handed over all the materials he had gathered to the police, bracing himself for any punishment. He thought that even if he couldn’t be forgiven, it couldn’t be helped.

But this was a different matter. Cha Eun-bi was a thorough perpetrator against Jeong Jiheon, but in their relationship, she was the victim.

Bae-il had used Cha Eun-bi for his own goals. He had known that Eun-bi had recordings from the black box and had approached her to find it.

As they became closer and Bae-il started visiting Eun-bi’s house, he discovered the memory card from the black box. He stole it and

immediately went into hiding.

At first, he planned to get rid of the memory card, transfer to a local branch, and forget everything. But somehow, it had ended up like this—truly, just somehow.

He wished everything would find its rightful place, and that everyone would receive punishment only for the wrongs they had committed.

Instead, he had unintentionally inflicted pain on an innocent person.

His breath caught in his throat.

The pain was greater than any punishment he had anticipated.

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With the heat beginning to wane and the sky growing high in September, a newlywed couple finally had a day off together for the company's anniversary and decided to do something they had been postponing.

After Jiheon finished preparing, he took Ye-na's hand and waited for his wife.

A moment later, the dressing room door of the studio opened, and Jeong-oh emerged. At that moment, Jiheon squinted his eyes as if he were seeing something unbelievable; it felt as though she had brought light out of the dressing room. Jiheon was left speechless at Jeong-oh's appearance.

"Wow! Mom looks like a princess!"

Ye-na exclaimed first, full of admiration.

Jeong-oh wore a mermaid-style dress that accentuated her beautiful curves. The dress was far from her usual attire, making movement uncomfortable and awkward. Jeong-oh briefly glanced at Jiheon, who remained silent, and then asked Ye-na,

"Does Mom look pretty?"

“Yeah! You look like Ariel! Dad, isn’t Mom pretty?”

“Yeah. She’s beautiful.”

Only then did Jeong-oh’s expression relax.

“Mom, you’re really, really beautiful!”

“Thank you. Our Ye-na looks like a princess too. You were born to be one.”

Ye-na also wore a lovely white dress. Any word—princess, angel, fairy—fit her perfectly; she was a beautiful daughter.

The child had been eagerly waiting for this day. It was the age where she loved princess dresses. Jeong-oh decided that the wedding shoot would be a wonderful gift for her child.

The couple agreed to take just one picture of themselves together. They didn’t want their child to become tired while waiting for them.

As two people working in advertising, they understood well that good expressions made photography easier, so they actively cooperated with the photographer’s requests. Jiheon felt like his lips were twitching, but he did his best.

The half-day shoot passed quickly.

In a studio decorated like an outdoor shooting location, Jiheon and Ye-na were getting ready for the final shoot. Jiheon and Ye-na settled down first, while Jeong-oh touched up her hair before moving over.

“Mom, hurry up!”

Ye-na, who was playing hand games with her dad and laughing, called out to Jeong-oh.

Seeing the scene from a distance, Jeong-oh sighed inwardly.

She had seen this scene in a dream before.

In that dream, she had walked through the park dressed up like this with Ye-na and met Jiheon. At that time, Ye-na recognized Jiheon and ran up to him, jumping into his arms. Jiheon took her and sat on a park bench while Ye-na laughed comfortably on his lap.

Jeong-oh couldn't approach them back then, even though it was just a dream.

The memory of hesitating at that moment lingered in Jeong-oh's mind until now. She realized only now that the dream wasn't a nightmare or a source of fear.

It was something she had long awaited. She had finally understood that it was simply a matter of her being able to approach these two and sit quietly by their side.

After finishing the wedding shoot and taking Ye-na to her Go school, Jeong-oh and Jiheon headed to the obstetrics and gynecology clinic.

Even though Jiheon had been there once before, he felt nervous again as he entered the examination room, just like it was his first time. He had wanted to rush to the hospital all this time but had stubbornly held back for Jeong-oh's sake, as he thought the process of her examination might be difficult.

"It's 6 mm. It's growing well. The heartbeat is strong," the doctor said calmly while showing the ultrasound image of the baby. Jiheon's lips felt dry as the doctor provided confirmation. Finally hearing the baby's heartbeat was a relief, allowing him to breathe more easily.

The baby had grown dramatically over the past two weeks. Its shape had changed; it had gone from looking like a round ring to resembling a tall, bobbing head.

The fact that this tiny being, measuring just 0.6 cm, had a powerful heart beating at 140 beats per minute was both astonishing and fascinating.

As Jeong-oh quietly stared at the monitor, she turned her head to look at Jiheon. He was so focused on the baby's image that he couldn't tear his

eyes away from the screen. Jeong-oh wanted to etch that sight into her memory.

In truth, this was Jeong-oh's first experience with such an examination as well. When she was pregnant with Ye-na, she had been so scared that she hadn't gone to the hospital for a long time. It wasn't until she informed her mother that she finally sought medical help.

This time, unlike then, seeing the tiny baby was incredible. The baby's strong heartbeat seemed to say, "Mom, I can be loved from now on. Please love me a lot."

Jiheon and Jeong-oh came out of the examination room with pictures and video recordings. While waiting to check out, Jiheon kept looking at the pictures.

The birth of a child meant that there would be many moments to record in life. Perhaps Jiheon had vaguely understood this seven years ago. Maybe that's why only the memory of November 2nd remained.

Looking at her husband, Jeong-oh spoke up.

"Should we visit your father's house this weekend?"

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. Let's contact him."

Jiheon immediately called Jaegwang. After a long wait with just the ringing tone, Jaegwang finally picked up the call.

[Hello?] His father's voice sounded strangely dark.

"Father, is everything okay?"

[Yes, it's fine.] "I'll come by this weekend."

[No, no. I have plans this weekend.] Jaegwang seemed flustered. Jeong-oh thought he would welcome their visit with open arms, but it appeared that

this notification had been too abrupt.

“When can we come by then?”

[…I’ve been busy. I’ll contact you when things calm down.] “…”

[How is Ye-na?] “She’s doing well.”

“Okay. Please send my regards to your mother. Let’s contact each other again.”
Although Jiheon’s father’s voice was soft and calm, there was something that felt like he was hiding something, and he seemed eager to end the call. After hanging up, Jiheon tilted his head slightly in confusion.

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The preparations for the move were progressing smoothly. The biggest task was organizing their belongings. Since they planned to sell the house in Seoul completely, most of Jiheon’s father’s belongings had to be discarded.

Eunbi comforted her mother, who was shedding tears over each of her father’s possessions as they cleaned the house.

At times, she stared blankly at her phone. The silence of her phone felt resentful, as if it were frozen in time.

On the previous Monday, Eunbi had asked Jeong-oh to deliver a note to Kwon Bae-il. The note included a brief message and her contact information.

That night, Jeong-oh informed her that the note had been successfully delivered, but there hadn’t been a single text from the intended recipient since then.

As the days passed, Eunbi resigned herself to her fate. Waiting for the man who had approached her to use her was making her feel foolish. Anger welled up inside her, and she flipped her phone face down.

However, just as she did that, her phone vibrated as if it had been waiting for that moment. Eunbi quickly picked up her phone. A call from an unknown number flashed on the screen. Instinctively, she knew it was the call she had been waiting for. She pressed the call button.

“Hello.”

Her voice trembled. There was silence on the other end. Unable to hold back, Eunbi asked first.

“Kwon Bae-il?”

[……Yes.]
After a long pause, a dry response came through. Eunbi bit her lower lip tightly, holding back tears.

“Are you okay?”

[……I’m sorry.]
“No, I asked if you were okay! I didn’t ask you to apologize!”

Eunbi snapped in anger at his formal apology, which felt like a wall between them.

That one apology confirmed everything. There was no way she could meet him again. Perhaps she had already resigned herself to this reality.

“I know that much. I will give birth to and raise my child. Don’t worry. I’m not asking you to take responsibility.”

She couldn’t hold on to something that wasn’t even love. So, her next words came out easily.

“I feel like I’m being punished right now, but it could become a reward someday. Jeong-oh said that. So don’t worry about me.”

A child she had never considered a friend, someone who felt like an enemy, had unexpectedly provided her with comfort. She had unknowingly held

onto that comfort like a lifeline. At that moment, she was genuinely grateful to Jeong-oh for providing her with the words to say.

“I just wanted to let you know. Someday your child will be born, and someday that child might want to see their father.”

[…….]
“I was going to ask you to at least leave your contact information, but it’s okay. If that’s burdensome, don’t do it. I’ll just live well on my own.”

Once again, a long pause preceded the response.

[……I’ll keep leaving my contact information.]
“…….”

[I’m sorry.]
The call that had begun with “I’m sorry” ended with “I’m sorry.” Was it hope? Had she perhaps chipped away at the tall wall just a little? But she couldn’t live by clinging to such small grains of hope. She needed to cut this relationship off.

“Okay. Let’s hang up.”

Eunbi spoke coldly.

Even though she told him to hang up, the call didn’t end for a long time. She gritted her teeth and pressed the end call button firmly.

As soon as she set her phone down, her legs went weak, and she slumped into her seat.

Haahh.

The emotions she had been holding back with all her strength burst out all at once.

“You did well. You did well.”

She repeated this while wiping her tears.

Everything was for the best. She hadn’t pitifully clung to him, and she had calmly finished the call.

Tears began to drop, one by one, eventually soaking the floor.

She had resolutely held on, vowing not to regret it, yet in the end, all that remained was empty hands.

Huuhh.

If we had met differently, would there have been another beginning?

No, perhaps there wouldn’t have even been a start at all?

Still, she didn’t want to erase the time she had spent with him.

She couldn’t even hate him, no matter how hard she tried. He was the only person who understood her deficiencies. Whether that was sincere or not, Eunbi had clearly found comfort every time.

A brief conversation from one of the nights they spent together came to mind. A memory imprinted in her heart, one she couldn’t erase even if she wanted to.

“You’re really interesting. Knowing that I’m going to Jiheon, why do you help me?”

“Because I know. I know what it feels like to be someone who wants to be loved but can’t receive that love.”

“……”

“Do you know what it’s like to feel lonely because you can’t be loved?”

Ch153 - The Thread

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Eun-yeob woke up in the deep night.

It took her half a day to regain her senses as her head throbbed. She could move her body but didn’t make any effort to do so.

Giving up on talking to anyone, she tried to recall what had happened just before the accident. The car she was driving, which had sped towards Jiheon, had been wrecked by an unexpected obstruction.

The old car she had borrowed had not had its airbags checked, which was a disaster, and Eun-yeob had been caught in the fallout.

The last person she had seen just before the accident was Kwon Bae-il. And in the fading consciousness, she heard Jiheon calling out, “Soo-il.”

Jiheon and Kwon Bae-il had conspired to push her to the brink of death.

All her plans must have failed, Jiheon was probably fine, and she had no idea if Kwon Bae-il was dead or alive.

Then who was standing outside?

It must have been the police.

Eun-yeob closed her eyes again, trying not to show that she was awake.

First, she needed to understand what had happened while she was unconscious, and how her fate would unfold once she left the hospital.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

While Guk-soon and Jiheon prepared for the celebration, Jeong-oh spent time with Ye-na. Ye-na was intently looking at the ultrasound photo and then asked Jeong-oh.

“Is this baby inside mommy’s belly?”

“Yes. Ye-na’s little sibling is in mommy’s belly.”

“How did it get in there? Did mommy eat it?”

Jeong-oh’s eyes flickered. He had to answer this correctly.

Clearing his throat, Jeong-oh replied slowly.

“Mommy and Daddy have a special seed that can create a baby, and Daddy gave the baby seed to Mommy. So Mommy’s baby seed met Daddy’s, and now they are raising the baby inside Mommy’s belly.”

Even with the answer he had memorized for this occasion, he felt a bit nervous.

“Why do you grow it in mommy’s belly? Daddy is stronger. Can’t we grow it in Daddy’s belly?”

Ye-na’s questions kept coming. Jeong-oh couldn’t help but laugh at her idea.

Oh, Ye-na, if it were possible, I’d want that too.

“No, it’s not possible. There’s a warm and cozy baby house only in mommy’s belly. This is the baby house.”

Jeong-oh pointed back at the round baby house in the photo.

Ye-na studied the picture again and then asked, “Did Ye-na live here too?”

“Of course. Isn’t it amazing?”

“Is the baby a girl or a boy?”

“I don’t know yet. We’ll have to wait a bit longer.”

“I hope it comes out soon.”

“Why do you want it to come out so quickly?”

“Because I want to make it do errands.”

While he felt a little concerned about the reason Ye-na wanted her sibling to be born quickly, Jeong-oh sighed in relief internally.

Even though she had been a mother for seven years, she still felt like a beginner. She constantly faced new challenges and sweat bullets every time. What other adventure could be as difficult and exciting as this? Raising a child was always a nerve-wracking adventure.

As Jeong-oh watched Ye-na brushing her doll’s hair, she got up from her seat and went to the kitchen, wondering if she could help with anything, but it seemed there was no room to intervene between Mrs. Guk-soon and Jiheon.

It appeared that the two had developed a sort of system. Guk-soon seemed proud to finally have a proper assistant after living with a daughter who couldn’t help in the kitchen for thirty years.

As Jeong-oh sat at the counter and picked at the food, Guk-soon scolded her.

“Eat later.”

“Why does it matter if I eat it first? You’re just going to give it to me anyway.”

“Guests are coming, so hold off and stop picking at everything.”

“What can I do? If I’m hungry, my stomach feels queasy.”

Jeong-oh pouted and replied. The second pregnancy had come with morning sickness, and she felt much worse on an empty stomach. Eating something helped her feel a little better. While it was concerning for Guk-soon to witness, it was actually a good excuse for Jeong-oh.

As she rolled her eyes, she noticed the beautiful pumpkin pancakes Jiheon had placed in front of her. The red peppers and crown daisies on top made it look like flowers were sitting on each pancake.

“Did you make this, oppa?”

“Yeah. Isn’t it pretty?”

“Why can’t you draw pictures when you can cook so beautifully?”

It wasn’t meant to be a jab; she genuinely wondered. Jiheon shot a glance at Jeong-oh, and Guk-soon, who had been listening to their conversation, chuckled and asked,

“Can our Jeong son-in-law not draw?”

“No, Mother. He draws well. I think Jeong-oh is just jealous because I can do everything well.”

“Why be jealous? That’s childish.”

As Guk-soon sided with Jiheon, he stuck out his tongue. Jeong-oh, who had just been enjoying teasing, casually lifted her arm and accidentally bumped the ladle holder with her elbow.

“Ouch.”

Jiheon, who had been teasing Jeong-oh moments ago, quickly changed his expression and rushed over to her.

“Are you okay?”

Seeing Jiheon’s suddenly serious expression, Guk-soon couldn’t help but smile. The bickering between them resembled that of siblings, but the way

he took care of her was undeniably like a loving couple.

“Stay still.”

Jiheon seated Jeong-oh at the table and returned to the counter. Jeong-oh found herself unable to approach the counter at all.

A little while later, Seung-kyu’s family arrived. The booming voice of Dobin was the first to be heard.

“Ye-naaaaa!”

“Dobin-aaaa!”

At the sound of Dobin calling her, Ye-na ran over. As soon as she met Dobin, she shared her happy news.

“I’m going to have a little sibling! They’re going to be born next year!”

“Really? My sibling is going to be born next year too!”

“Isn’t that amazing?”

“Yeah! It seems like our siblings made a promise!”

Through the conversation of the two children, Jin-seo suddenly understood the reason for their invitation.

“So that’s why you called us! Congratulations! Our third baby has made a friend so quickly!”

Seung-kyu also chimed in to congratulate her.

“If I had known, I would have brought a gift.”

“It’s not too late now. Order something online.”

Jiheon replied to Seung-kyu. Seung-kyu could definitely tell that Jiheon had changed a lot.

Time flies when you’re with good people.

After Seung-kyu’s family left, Guk-soon, while putting Ye-na to bed and tidying up, turned to Jeong-oh, reminiscing about the evening.

“Thanks to you, I laughed a lot today.”

“Yeah, Mom. It was fun, right?”

A family celebration to commemorate her pregnancy with loved ones; it was something Jeong-oh had never experienced before.

Behind the happy sentiment, Guk-soon’s lament continued.

“I still need to greet my in-laws.”

As Jeong-oh was arranging the dishes, her hands suddenly paused. She recalled the conversation she had had with Jiheon earlier that day. Jiheon had mentioned calling Jae-gwang but had only received a response that he would call back later.

After finishing the cleanup and greeting Guk-soon, Jeong-oh entered the bedroom and asked Jiheon,

“Isn’t it a bit strange?”

“What’s strange?”

“About your father.”

Jiheon nodded in agreement with Jeong-oh’s question. His father’s reaction was indeed unusual. Jeong-oh suggested subtly to Jiheon,

“Why don’t you ask Manager Oh?”

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

The next morning, Jiheon and Jeong-oh went straight to the hospital.

They received unexpected news from Manager Oh, Jae-gwang's secretary: Young-mi had collapsed a few days earlier and had been hospitalized. It was a chaotic time with many incidents in and out of the group, so no one could be informed.

Upon hearing the news, Jiheon showed no signs of agitation. However, Jeong-oh, who knew her husband didn't express his emotions outwardly, sensed that his breathing had deepened. Jeong-oh persuaded Jiheon to visit the hospital.

The ties of family are incredibly strong, even when they aren't at their strongest. The only scissors that can cut those ties lie within the heart, and sharpening the blade in one's heart can hurt their own heart as well.

So, cutting the ties is difficult.

After watching Young-mi for a few days, Jae-gwang returned to work to handle the backlog of duties, leaving a caregiver by Young-mi's side. While Jiheon spoke with the caregiver outside the hospital room, Jeong-oh entered the room first to be alone with Young-mi.

She was relieved to have come to see her, even if it was late. It had been almost two months since she had seen Mrs. Jang Young-mi, and she looked utterly lifeless. Her thin body struggled to even move a finger as she quietly exhaled.

How painful it is that the heart never ages, yet the body slowly dies. This grief cannot be understood unless one watches it closely. Young-mi's memories of her life would be flowing through her mind now.

"Do you still resent me?"

Jeong-oh sat in the chair beside Young-mi. Young-mi turned her head to look at Jeong-oh, her parched lips seeming to search for water. Jeong-oh raised the adjustable bed to help Young-mi sit up and moisten her lips.

Young-mi painfully swallowed a sip of water. Jeong-oh lowered the bed again to let Young-mi lie down comfortably.

In the quickly drying air, Young-mi, who had been silent for a moment, spoke in a voice cracked like a desert.

“At that time…”

“…”

“I didn’t know… you were pregnant.”

“…”

“I’m sorry. I made it hard for you.”

Jeong-oh’s eyes widened at the unexpected apology. She tried to maintain her composure, but her heart began to tremble.

Despite having waited so long for those words, her chest felt as if it had collapsed. She felt she might cry before Young-mi did.

She was certain this was a difficult and hard-won voice to express.

Still, it felt unfair.

She didn’t want to receive an apology from someone who seemed weak. The feeling of looking at a weakened person could only soften her resolve.

She wanted to stand equally before her and receive the apology with a sincere expression.

However, she couldn’t help but think of her husband.

The biggest victim of all these events was Jiheon. Chae Eun-yeop, Chae Eun-bi, and Ham Dae-geun had not properly apologized to Jiheon. He had received an apology from Kwon Bae-il, but another wound had been left on him.

Still, her husband did not show signs of distress. Even as he sometimes thrashed in nightmares, he marched forward, believing that everything would be fine if he moved on.

Those who apologize deserve a chance to do so. Jeong-oh had learned this teaching from Guk-soon.

Even if her heart wasn’t ready, for her husband’s sake, she had to accept the apology. She didn’t know when or how things would change.

Jeong-oh also opened her parched lips.

In that moment, the half-open door swung wide open.

“Mother.”

With a calm voice and equally steady steps, Jiheon approached.

Jiheon quickly lowered himself to match Young-mi’s gaze, sitting closely in front of her.

“I know how difficult it is to apologize. Right now, it must be even harder for you to move.”

It seemed he had heard Young-mi’s voice from outside.

“But I can’t accept that kind of apology.”

At Jiheon’s words, Jeong-oh gasped in surprise.

Is this really okay?

Hey, Jeong Jiheon, your mother is sick! Is this really permissible? Won’t you regret this?

Jeong-oh looked back and forth between Jiheon and Young-mi. She could see Young-mi’s eyes trembling. The cold rejection from Jiheon had deeply hurt her.

“Are you saying that a few words will resolve the past and make you feel better?”

Jiheon’s forceful tone made Jeong-oh beside him feel anxious.

“Think carefully. Was it only Jeong-oh and me who suffered because of you?”

Although Jiheon’s voice was calm and cold, there was a small tremor in it.

As his quiet resentment continued, Jeong-oh felt her heart growing warmer.

Somewhere that hadn’t hurt before was starting to sting.

“Don’t try to feel comfortable.”

It sounded like a word of resentment, but perhaps Young-mi wouldn’t grasp it.

Yet, in Jeong-oh’s eyes, Jiheon’s sincerity was unmistakable.

“Overcome this. Get well and apologize again. I will keep waiting.”

It was also a son’s faith that his mother would not so easily leave him.

Ch154 - The Changing Times

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Jiheon heard Young-mi’s voice from outside the hospital room. He had been told that she hadn’t spoken a word to the caregiver today, but hearing her voice, even in such a difficult state, suggested how desperate she must have been.

Yet, Jiheon couldn’t easily accept it. Her voice, her breaths, sounded so pitiful.

In that fleeting moment, memories of his past rushed through his mind. Excluding the three years he had lost, his thirty-three years had always been accompanied by his mother’s voice.

She expressed her love, sought to be loved, and paved his path forward. While it may have been a safe and comfortable road, it was not what Jiheon truly desired.

The mother, who had been so stubborn, suddenly apologized for the past.

Jiheon clenched his fist tightly, which had dropped below his waist.

His lack of sincerity in everything stemmed from his mother’s influence. His negative and cynical attitude had also been shaped by her. Therefore, he found it hard to believe a changing heart.

“Because I’m hurting, please forgive me. Because I’m hurting, please love me.”

If that was her intent, he couldn’t comply.

Even if it wasn’t that, he still couldn’t accept it. He could tell just by the look in Jeong-oh’s eyes when she entered the room that she was equally bewildered by the situation.

Forgiveness also requires time. She thought that there was no need to respond immediately to a surprising apology.

“Overcome this. Get well and apologize again. I will keep waiting.”

Having made the best decision he could, Jiheon held Jeong-oh’s hand.

“I’ll be going now. Don’t skip your meals.”

As Jiheon pulled her hand, Jeong-oh awkwardly tilted her head and said goodbye as they left the room.

The moment they stepped out of the hospital room, Jiheon’s hurried steps, which had seemed angry, became calm by the time they reached the elevator.

However, Jeong-oh’s heart began to stir even more after that. The moment she opened the car door in the parking lot, tears fell.

“What’s wrong? Why are you like this?”

Jiheon, who had maintained a stiff expression the whole time, asked in surprise. Jeong-oh shook her head and sat in the passenger seat.

Jiheon followed her to the driver’s seat and, seeing Jeong-oh’s tears falling, felt unsure of what to do before cautiously asking,

“Is this not okay? Did I do something wrong?”

“No. No…”

Jeong-oh shook her head. She wiped her tears, but they kept flowing.

“Then why?”

She had tried to accept her mother-in-law's apology. In the moment she was ready to open her heart to respond, Jiheon had walked into the hospital room and voiced the feelings that had long been buried deep within her.

In that brief moment, how many thoughts and worries must have rushed through her mind?

How much pain was she in while saying that?

Jeong-oh had wanted to forgive just for her own comfort, but how scared must Jiheon have been? How frightened must she still be now?

In that urgent situation, Jeong-oh felt grateful and sorry for Jiheon's decisiveness in articulating what he wanted from his mother, even with a wounded heart. And so, the best thing she could do was simply to say,

"You did well. Thank you."

Even if the worst situation were to come to his mother, despite his firm belief, even if fate flowed in a way that exceeded his expectations, she wanted him not to regret or blame himself too much. She wanted him not to suffer for too long.

Jeong-oh leaned in and hugged Jiheon.

***

Young-mi had been diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. Jeong-oh learned that this illness often appears in people in their fifties to seventies. Until two months ago, she had appeared so healthy, and the rapid decline was due to the word "acute" preceding the diagnosis.

Upon learning about Young-mi's condition, Jeong-oh felt even more concerned for Jiheon.

In truth, Jiheon seemed unfazed. As always, he jokingly interacted with Guk-soon and was endlessly affectionate toward Ye-na.

His expression while playing Go with Ye-na was no different from usual.

When Jiheon noticed Ye-na placing a piece in an unexpected spot, he pointed it out.

“Why did you put it there?”

“Oops! Dad, it was a mistake. Ye-na made a mistake!”

“Even if it’s a mistake, you can’t take it back.”

“Ugh, Dad, that’s unfair!”

“Still, it’s not allowed. That’s the rule of Go.”

As Ye-na pouted, facing a potential loss due to a slight mistake, Jiheon encouraged her with a serious demeanor.

“But this kind of mistake can be seen as a wonderful one.”

“A wonderful mistake?”

“Yes. You’ll realize how wonderful this mistake was in time. You might not understand it right now.”

After contemplating Jiheon’s words, Ye-na suddenly exclaimed, “Oh! I understand!”

“Our Ye-na already gets it?”

“Yeah! I learned that by making this mistake, I could lose if I keep playing like this.”

“Exactly. That’s right.”

Jiheon smiled proudly at her clear answer.

Jeong-oh stood at a distance, watching the warm interaction between father and daughter for a long time. Jiheon’s calm demeanor made her feel a bit sorry for him. She thought he must be enduring a lot of pain with all his might.

Just as Jeong-oh was looking at Jiheon, Guk-soon, gazing affectionately at Jeong-oh, quietly said in a voice only she could hear, “I understand.”

This meant that he understood Young-mi’s position.

“When you see the end of life, that’s the only thought that remains: wanting to spare your child from suffering.”

The desire not to burden one’s children—a common feeling among ordinary parents.

“That’s why she’s asking for forgiveness, even if it’s late. She doesn’t want to be a burden to you.”

“Yeah…”

“But you did well.”

Though Guk-soon had offered only a brief opinion, he respected Jiheon’s choice.

“If Jeong-seobang said that, then your mother will be okay. He knows best.”

“Yeah, I think so too.”

After finishing the short conversation with her mother, Jeong-oh went into her room, paused for a moment to think, then called Jae-gwang. This was the first time Jeong-oh had initiated a call to him.

After a long wait, the phone finally connected.

[It’s you, Sae-ah.] “Father, how have you been?”

[Yeah. I heard you visited Jiheon at the hospital today?] “Yes. Did you hear anything?”

[Jiheon didn’t mention anything, but Director Oh told me.] “Oh… didn’t my mother say anything?”

[She didn’t say anything.] “How was her mood?”

[She looked a bit down… but she’s been like that lately.] “Um, Father, I have something to tell you.”

Jeong-oh opened her mouth heavily. She felt it was her responsibility to inform him about what happened in the hospital today since Young-mi hadn’t said anything. She hoped Jae-gwang would look after the heartbroken Young-mi.

[…So that happened.] “I don’t think Jiheon is unwilling to accept her apology. I believe he wants her to recover more than anyone else.”

[Yeah, I think so too.] “But your mother’s feelings may be different. I hope you’ll keep an eye on her.”

[Got it. Thank you for telling me.] Having heard everything, Jae-gwang spoke kindly.

[Don’t worry too much. Thanks for visiting, and please tell Ye-na to take care too.] With Jae-gwang’s gentle voice, some of Jeong-oh’s worries began to ease.

As time passed and she listened to various perspectives, Jeong-oh gradually began to organize her feelings.

She had also built a wall against Young-mi, but she could feel that the solid wall was starting to weaken and crumble. Just as she had said she would be ready to accept an apology again someday, she was beginning to prepare herself to accept it.

It was a time of changing feelings.

***

A few days later, on a cool evening.

Jeong-oh decided to take Ye-na to visit the hospital where Young-mi was admitted. This decision had been made the previous night during a phone

call between Ye-na and Jae-gwang.

Jiheon had mentioned he would come separately due to his schedule, which made Jeong-oh a bit anxious, but Ye-na reassured her that she wouldn’t be scared if she didn’t have to get a shot at the hospital.

And so, they returned to the hospital.

Jeong-oh held Ye-na’s hand and opened the hospital room door. The caregiver, who had previously exchanged greetings with them, was guarding the room alone.

“Welcome, little lady.”

Unable to wake Young-mi, who had just fallen asleep, the caregiver stepped outside to greet Jeong-oh and Ye-na.

“Hello! Where’s my father?”

“He went out for a moment due to work but will be back in an hour. You should let Madam rest.”

The caregiver handed a gift box to Ye-na.

“The chairman asked me to apologize for suddenly stepping out and to give this gift to his granddaughter when she comes.”

“Wow!”

Excited, Ye-na opened the box right there. Last time she received a colored pencil set, but this time it was a set of colored markers. It seemed Jae-gwang had plans to nurture Ye-na as an artist.

“Thank you! I didn’t know what you might need, so I didn’t bring anything. I’ll go buy something. Is there anything you need? Or something you want to eat?”

Jeong-oh asked the caregiver after greeting her.

“Just some juice would be nice.”

“Okay. Ye-na, do you want to come with me?”

“I want to stay here!”

Ye-na was eager to start drawing with her grandfather’s gift, bouncing on her feet.

“Then I’ll be back quickly, so stay quiet and play without waking your grandma.”

“Okay!”

Reluctantly, Jeong-oh left Ye-na in the caregiver’s temporary care and headed downstairs alone.

On her way to the convenience store in the basement, she spotted a familiar face in the food court. It was a police officer from the Yongsan Police Station investigating the significant incidents related to Chae Eun-yeob.

“Detective! Hello!”

“Oh, hello.”

The police officer recognized Jeong-oh and greeted her back. Since her family had cooperated extensively in the case concerning Chae Eun-yeob, the police officer was friendly towards Jeong-oh.

“What brings you here?”

“Chae Eun-yeob is in this hospital. It’s in a different ward, though.”

Jeong-oh was taken aback by the officer’s response.

Young-mi had been admitted to this hospital because it had the best prognosis for leukemia treatment in South Korea. Knowing that Chae Eun-yeob was in the same hospital must have been unavoidable for her.

She wished nothing would happen.

“…Has Chae Eun-yeob regained consciousness?”

“Not yet, but he’s said to be aware. According to the doctor, he should recover without any problems. If he has the will, he might wake up and move, but it’s hard to tell if he really can’t wake up or if he’s pretending due to some premonition of his fate.”

Jeong-oh’s heart raced at the police officer’s explanation.

As Jeong-oh’s expression grew serious, the officer’s phone vibrated. He excused himself and answered the call. After responding with a brief, “Yes, I understand,” he hung up and started clearing his tray.

“They say Chae Eun-yeob has woken up.”

At the officer’s words, Jeong-oh’s heart began to race even faster.

Ch155 - An Unyielding Heart

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Eun-yeob had been pretending not to wake up all this time. He knew his fate.

Once he recovered, he would head straight to prison.

A body already reserved for imprisonment. A body that could no longer make a comeback.

If that were the case, before heading to the detention center, it would feel satisfying to ruin the life of the one who had made him like this.

Eun-yeob trained his body in the moments when others' gazes were diverted. He wanted to be able to move right after waking up. While lying down, he focused on strengthening his core and building up the strength in his limbs.

Though his recovery was slow to avoid being caught by anyone, with his fierce will, there was nothing he couldn't do.

However, as the act continued for a long time, the doctors gradually began to notice that he had regained consciousness. The day before, a nurse had called Eun-bi and their mother to the hospital room.

Eun-yeob kept his eyes tightly closed in front of Eun-bi and their mother. He had to perform his act properly to achieve his goal. Still, in the midst of it, he gathered new information.

"Mrs. Jang Young-mi is here."

“In this hospital?”

“Yes, apparently.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure. It sounds pretty serious. They said she couldn’t come to your dad’s funeral because of it.”

Eun-yeob clearly heard the conversation as his mother and Eun-bi left his hospital room.

Jang Young-mi is here!

With this enticing information, Eun-yeob deduced the situation.

If Young-mi and Jae-gwang were here, they would know Eun-yeob was in the hospital. Therefore, they would have avoided it on purpose, but the fact that they were admitted here meant there was a reason they had no choice but to come.

The hospital where Eun-yeob was admitted had outstanding results in treating leukemia and heart diseases.

‘It must be leukemia or a heart condition.’

Since it was said to be serious, her condition must have worsened, and Jeong Jae-gwang would be doing everything he could to save his wife.

Jang Young-mi would undoubtedly be in a VIP room.

‘The VIP rooms are on the 20th floor of the adjacent ward.’

Eun-yeob carefully began to devise a plan. Having been there before, he was familiar with the structure of the hospital. He continuously simulated in his mind how he would move.

And then, one afternoon, with a plan firmly in place, Eun-yeob opened his eyes.

“Eun-yeob Chae? Are you awake?”

The one welcoming Eun-yeob was the police officer who had been watching over him for several nights.

Eun-yeob stared blankly, pretending not to recognize the police officer, and spoke with difficulty. Of course, it was all an act.

“Where am I…?”

“You’re in a hospital. Do you remember there was an accident?”

“An accident…? What do you mean?”

“Do you have no memory of it at all?”

“But… who are you?”

The police officer made a puzzled expression at Eun-yeob’s weak voice. Turning around to call somewhere, the officer returned and, in a cold voice typical of police, informed him of his rights.

“Eun-yeob Chae, there is an arrest warrant out for you on charges of instigating the murder of Kim Jin-goo and attempted murder of Jeong Ji-heon. You have the right to appoint a lawyer, exercise your right to remain silent, and refuse any statements that may be used against you.”

“…”

“You will be transferred to a detention center after receiving recovery treatment at this hospital. Until then, police officers and correctional staff will be stationed here.”

“…Wait a minute. Something seems off…”

Eun-yeob interjected with a weak yet polite voice.

“I think you’re misunderstanding something. I haven’t done anything to be detained… Instigating murder? What’s this about attempted murder…?”

The police officer furrowed his brows in confusion.

“Eun-yeob Chae, what’s the most recent thing you remember?”

“…My father mentioned he might become a candidate for Chief Justice…”

Realizing the gravity of the situation, the police officer let out a rough sigh. It had been almost a month since Eun-yeob’s father, Chae Seo-bok, passed away. The media had reported long before that he was nominated as a candidate for Chief Justice.

He had lost his memory. He didn’t even know his father had passed away and had become a fool…

The police, who had not fully grasped Eun-yeob’s vile nature, momentarily thought he had lost his mind.

“Eun-yeob Chae, listen carefully. Today is September 15th, and your father passed away on August 20th.”

“What? What do you mean…?”

Eun-yeob looked at the police officer with an expression as if the world had collapsed.

“…Why did he pass away?”

The police officer seemed hesitant to speak, keeping his mouth shut.

“That can’t be true. It can’t be… My father died?”

Reluctantly, the police officer pulled out his phone and searched for news articles, showing Eun-yeob an article from the day of Chae Seo-bok’s passing.

Eun-yeob’s hands trembled as he took the phone. He began to breathe heavily, gasping as if he were struggling to breathe properly.

“I can’t believe it… No, no, no…”

Suddenly, he broke down in tears. It was a heart-wrenching scene that anyone could see. It was the anguished cry of a child who had lost a father.

***

Ji-heon's schedule coincided with Jae-gwang's. The two attended the same meeting. After the meeting, it was only natural that they began discussing Young-mi.

Young-mi's first chemotherapy session would involve remission-inducing chemotherapy to kill the leukemia cells in her bone marrow. The doctors estimated a 70% chance of complete remission in the first round, but they noted that even after achieving complete remission, they would need to continue monitoring her prognosis.

The best approach to achieving a cure was to undergo a hematopoietic stem cell or bone marrow transplant after complete remission.

"We'll start chemotherapy the day after tomorrow. After the treatment, I'm considering a bone marrow or stem cell transplant."

"In that case, I might be a suitable candidate."

"Right. If it's not you, we'll have to find a donor from the general public. We might not be able to find one."

Jae-gwang's voice was heavy.

The likelihood of matching hematopoietic stem cell types is 25% among siblings, 5% between parents and children, and 0.005% with unrelated individuals. Since Young-mi had no siblings, Ji-heon was probably her only possible match. But even that was only 5%.

"I hope my genetic type matches."

In fact, Ji-heon was not someone who believed in a 5% chance. However, at this moment, he found himself hoping for a miracle. He sincerely wished for his mother's recovery.

“I’ll ask the genetic research center where we did the paternity test a long time ago. They conduct various blood tests, so they should have my genetic records. With those records, we can check if my hematopoietic stem cells match my mother’s. Of course, I can go for the test myself later.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Ji-heon felt a bit awkward receiving gratitude from his father for doing something that seemed natural for a son. He replied with a smile instead.

Just as their father-son conversation was coming to a close, Ji-heon’s phone vibrated. It was a message from the counselor Ji-heon had hired. His expression hardened as he read the message.

– Chae Eun-yeob has woken up.

***

Ye-na sat by her grandmother, who had not yet woken up, diligently drawing with the pen her grandfather had gifted her. The nurse watched Ye-na with a warm smile. During this time, the nurse received a phone call.

Since Young-mi was asleep, she couldn’t make any noise. The nurse whispered in a voice only Ye-na could hear.

“Ye-na, I’ll step out for a moment to take this call.”

“Okay.”

The nurse left the room quietly to avoid disturbing Young-mi, but as soon as she stepped out, Young-mi woke up.

Young-mi gazed at Ye-na, who was absorbed in her drawing at the bedside. She wanted to see what the child was drawing, but she didn’t have the strength to lift her body.

“Ye-na.”

“Yes!”

Ye-na perked up at Young-mi's small voice and replied.

"When did you come?"

"At 6:10. I went to the Go academy and came straight here."

"Do you like Go?"

"Yes."

Ye-na answered firmly.

Young-mi reminisced about Ji-heon from long ago. When he was just Ye-na's age, Ji-heon loved Go. He was so talented that people called him a Go prodigy.

However, after meeting his friend Yoo Soo-il, Ji-heon lost interest in Go. It was because of Young-mi. She had pressured him to distance himself from Yoo Soo-il, and while she succeeded in separating her son from his friend, Ji-heon lost his passion for the game.

What she thought was love had turned into resentment.

"How much does grandma hurt?"

While Young-mi was lost in her thoughts, Ye-na spoke up. When Young-mi took too long to answer, Ye-na didn't wait and handed her grandmother the drawing she had worked hard on while Young-mi slept.

"Grandma, this is a gift for you."

It was something that looked like a dinosaur with wings.

"What is this?"

"It's the fairy of healing."

It didn't look like a fairy, but Young-mi smiled.

Once again, thoughts of her son crossed her mind.

No matter how much she sent him to art academies or arranged art tutoring, Ji-heon's drawing skills never improved. Jae-gwang had suggested giving up, saying some things just couldn't be helped, but Young-mi couldn't bring herself to do that.

After a lot of hard work to improve his skills, twelve-year-old Ji-heon won an excellence award at an imaginative drawing competition. Young-mi still couldn't forget the pride she felt at that achievement.

"Look at this. You did it! Good job, my son, you're amazing!"

When Ji-heon won the award, it felt like she had won it herself. She thought that was happiness. She didn't know how to separate herself from her son. Those years of obsession ultimately led to this outcome.

Receiving a gift from her granddaughter should have made her grateful, but Young-mi didn't know what to say. After thinking for a long time, she finally expressed her gratitude.

"Thanks to the fairy of healing, grandma will get better soon."

***

Thanks to the excuse of having lost his memory and bursting into tears right after waking up, the police felt pity for Eun-yeob and called for a doctor. The doctor explained that Eun-yeob had temporarily lost his memory but would likely recover it as his body healed.

In any case, the brief act had loosened the watch on him. However, he couldn't prolong it for long. The longer he dragged it out, the more suspicion would grow.

Eun-yeob took advantage of the police's momentary distraction to wiggle his legs. They moved quite well as he intended.

Thanks to the intense training he had done while lying in bed, his body wasn't too heavy. Having assessed his condition, he needed to put his plan

into action. Eun-yeob waited for the police to step away.

He had one chance. It might be about an hour before they would likely assign more than one guard now that news of his awakening had spread. Moreover, he might be handcuffed.

After a brief wait, an excellent opportunity presented itself to Eun-yeob.

While the police officer was answering a phone call, Eun-yeob escaped from his hospital room.

He had to finish what he started before they realized he was gone. Eun-yeob ran without a plan.

He quickly caught an elevator down to the fifth floor, moving through the corridor connecting to the adjacent ward before taking another elevator.

‘Now to the 20th floor.’

Eun-yeob got off on the 20th floor. The entrance to the VIP room was blocked, but soon a nurse opened the door and stepped out, allowing him to slip in before it closed.

So far, everything was going smoothly. But there wasn’t much time. Everything was a risk and a gamble.

If Young-mi wasn’t in the VIP room or if someone else was there, or if the police happened to be guarding the entrance unexpectedly, his plans would fall apart, and he would become a more serious criminal.

Eun-yeob walked cautiously down the hallway. The VIP room was Room 40. The room at the very end was likely the highest grade. Eun-yeob decided to check the last room first.

As he reached the end of the hallway, he could hear a familiar voice through a slightly ajar door.

“Thanks to the fairy of healing, grandma will get better soon.”

It was Young-mi’s voice. But even more importantly…

“Yes! The fairy of healing will make grandma better quickly!”

That little kid.

That little brat who has ruined my life and my family’s life!

Eun-yeob’s eyes lit up as he recognized Jeong Ye-na.

Jeong Ji-heon’s child was alone in the hospital room with her grandmother.

Eun-yeob quickly changed his target.

That little brat. I need to get rid of her.

Eun-yeob strode into the hospital room.

Ye-na’s adorable voice made Young-mi smile softly. But that smile quickly shattered into horror.

Young-mi’s face turned pale.

Chae Eun-yeob was approaching from behind Ye-na, wearing a terrifying expression and gripping a thin IV line. It seemed like he intended to strangle Ye-na with the hose.

Without a moment to think, Young-mi quickly rose and, just before Eun-yeob could reach Ye-na, she lifted a nearby pole with all her strength and threw it with all her might. It was an unexplainable force.

Crash!

With a dull sound, the pole struck Eun-yeob’s head.

Ye-na’s face went pale, rendering her speechless, while the fallen Eun-yeob got back up with an even more monstrous expression and shouted.

“This woman!”

In the meantime, Young-mi shouted desperately, tears welling in her eyes.

“Run, sweetie! Get out of here!”

Taking advantage of the moment Young-mi was blocking Eun-yeob, Ye-na quickly fled the hospital room.

What should I do now?

Terrified, Ye-na lost her bearings and looked around. Her heart raced.

At that moment, a memory from a long-ago Go competition suddenly came to mind. Her mom had definitely taught her what to do in a situation like this.

“Mommy!”

Ye-na shouted loudly down the corridor.

“Mommy!”

Ch156 - Trust Your Mom

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Chae Eun-yeob woke up…

Jung O's steps grew heavy as she parted ways with the police and headed towards the convenience store. She thought she should quickly buy some juice and go back to the hospital room. However, while she was purchasing the juice and paying, the police officer she had just met hurried over and called out to her.

"Ma'am, can I ask you something?"

"Yes, detective."

"You mentioned that your mother was hospitalized, right? Which room is she in?"

"Room 2040. What's going on?"

"We received a report that Chae Eun-yeob is missing. I was wondering if she might have gone that way."

In an instant, Jung O felt darkness close in around her.

Her mother, and…

'Ye-na!'

Jung O dropped the juice she had just paid for and ran off with the police.

.....

As soon as Ye-na fled the hospital room, Eun-yeob turned around. Jeong Ye-na was more important than Jang Young-mi. If he could cut off Ye-na's breath, it would be a proper act of revenge.

He should have done this from the start. He should have gotten rid of the little brat.

It would have been much easier that way. That would have left the deepest wound on the Jeong family.

But just as Eun-yeob was about to follow Ye-na, he was suddenly stopped by Young-mi, who had somehow gotten out of bed and was gripping his ankle tightly.

"Let go! Are you crazy?!"

Eun-yeob kicked Young-mi with all his might, but it was useless. Young-mi clung to him as if she were made of stone. There was no way to understand where the frail, sick woman was finding such strength.

"Mommy!"

While Young-mi was holding on, a child's sorrowful voice came from outside the hospital room. Eun-yeob grew anxious.

People would be arriving soon. He needed to accomplish something before there was no time left.

Eun-yeob shifted his focus again and bent down. It might be better to take care of Young-mi first. Facing her fear, Young-mi's terrified eyes sent a jolt through him. Eun-yeob tightened his grip around her thin neck.

Young-mi struggled desperately to break free, but she couldn't escape Eun-yeob's grasp. Her breath was being cut off.

"Do you know? Even if I get rid of you now, I won't die. I'll just get a life sentence."

Eun-yeob’s eyes sparkled with rage. This was the final struggle of someone who had hit rock bottom and had nothing left to lose.

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The caregiver stepped out of the hospital room, thinking it was a good time to change the pillowcase. She went to find the housekeeping staff, who handed her a new pillowcase from the storeroom.

“Mommy!”

At that moment, the caregiver heard a child’s voice in the corridor. Startled, she rushed out.

In the room next to Young-mi’s.

“Mommy!”

A young couple perked up their ears at the sound echoing in the hallway.

“Who is looking for their mom like that?”

“Did they lose their mom?”

“Why don’t you go check? It sounds just like our kid, but that can’t be.”

A man emerged from the hospital room. Hearing Ye-na’s voice, another person from a different room also came outside.

“Why are you crying, little one? Did you lose your mom?”

“A bad person came into my grandmother’s room.”

Ye-na spoke clearly but with a voice full of tears.

Sounds were coming from the room she was pointing to. People rushed over, and a nurse who had been nearby followed them.

“Mommy!”

Ye-na continued to cry, looking for her mother. Like a magic spell, the elevator doors opened. As soon as Jung O appeared, Ye-na's cries intensified.

"Mommy!"

"Ye-na!"

Jung O hugged Ye-na tightly.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"A bad person came into Grandma's room!"

Ye-na said while crying.

As people rushed towards Young-mi's hospital room, the police officer who had exited the elevator with Jung O immediately sprinted towards the room. Jung O lifted Ye-na in her arms and headed to the hospital room.

The resistance from Young-mi, who had been twisting her body, faded away. Eun-yeob, seeing Young-mi's limbs sprawled out, took a deep breath and stood up. Now he had to find the little brat.

At that moment, people burst into the hospital room.

"What are you doing here, patient?!"

The nurse shouted. In the urgent moment, Eun-yeob came up with a plan.

"No… this person is unconscious…"

But the man from the adjacent room did not believe him.

"No, the child said there was a bad person!"

Eun-yeob's eyes changed. He picked up the pole that Young-mi had thrown away and waved it menacingly at the people.

“Get back!”

“Patient! You can’t do this here! Get a hold of yourself!”

“Chae Eun-yeob!”

As the nurse shouted, the police entered the room.

Eun-yeob swung the pole with all his strength. However, the police pushed forward without regard for him. Eventually, the pole struck one of the officers in the head. Even while being hit, the officer reached out to grab the pole. In that moment, the crowd surrounded Eun-yeob.

“Move! Let go!”

Eun-yeob struggled violently, and everyone had to work together to hold him down. Finally, the police managed to get Eun-yeob onto the floor and cuffed his hands.

“Why is this guy so coherent?”

The police muttered in frustration. Seizing on this hint, the completely restrained Eun-yeob suddenly asked the police with a benign expression.

“Detective, where is this? Why am I here…?”

He was pretending to be mentally unstable, trying to create an excuse for leniency in court.

“Is this guy out of his mind?”

The police grimaced, as if they had seen every kind of lunatic imaginable.

While the police dragged Eun-yeob out, Jung O entered the room still holding Ye-na. There was no time to curse at Eun-yeob.

“Ma’am! Ma’am!”

The caregiver shouted.

In the chaotic and disheveled hospital room, Young-mi lay as if lifeless, sprawled out on the floor.

“Mother…!”

Jung O was in a state of shock.

The nurse quickly checked for breathing. Young-mi had no pulse. Her heart had stopped.

“Call the doctor immediately!”

The nurse shouted to the others as she began performing CPR.

“Mother, Mother.”

Jung O moved closer, calling out to Young-mi.

It was a desperate moment for everyone.

The nurse’s body became soaked with sweat. After one cycle of chest compressions and rescue breaths, Young-mi’s lips moved faintly. Jung O leaned down to listen to Young-mi’s chest.

The faint sound of a heartbeat could be heard.

“I can hear it. The heartbeat.”

One more cycle of CPR was performed. Jung O held Young-mi’s hand tightly, watching her condition closely. More rescue breaths were given, and soon a weak breath escaped from Young-mi.

Haaa, the people who had gathered gasped in relief.

“Mother, are you okay?”

Jung O shouted loudly, close to Young-mi. Stabilized in her breathing, Young-mi looked at Jung O and blinked.

Haaaah.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

After greeting the nurse, Jung O’s entire body relaxed, and she collapsed forward.

Thank you, oh God.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

Ye-na burst into tears again.

For some reason, Young-mi found the sound of the child’s cries pleasant.

In front of Young-mi was a child whose bangs were soaked with sweat and tears. The center of the child’s forehead was bright red, as if on fire. It looked just like her son, with a flame-shaped birthmark.

Maybe I can let go now; maybe that will bring me some relief, she thought. At that moment, her son’s voice suddenly flashed in her mind.

“Hang in there. Get better and apologize to me again. I’ll keep waiting.”

She couldn’t let go of her son’s request. Perhaps that had held her onto life.

Tears also welled up in Young-mi’s eyes.

Listening to the sweet sound of the child’s cries, Young-mi closed her eyes again as if to fall asleep.

.....

Eun-yeob was immediately transferred to a detention center. Since it was confirmed that his body was fine, there was no need for him to stay in the hospital any longer.

Hearing the news, Ji-heon and Jae-gwang rushed over.

“Dad!”

Ye-na spotted Ji-heon from the other end of the hallway and ran over to him.

“Ye-na, are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“I’m fine! But Grandma almost died.”

Ye-na replied.

Young-mi, having fallen into a deep sleep and then waking up, was to undergo examinations. Thankfully, the CPR had been performed in time, but there were bruises appearing on various parts of her body once again. Young-mi’s cancer treatment was postponed by one day.

The doctor suggested that preparations be made for a stem cell transplant right after the chemotherapy. Based on the genetic testing records provided by the genetics lab to the hospital, Ji-heon was called in.

Ji-heon, along with Ye-na, who didn’t want to be separated from her father, found the doctor’s office.

“I’d like to retest Jeong Ji-heon’s genetic samples.”

The doctor said, and Ji-heon asked,

“Sure. I’m willing to take the test, but is there a problem?”

“The genetic types of the patient and your granddaughter match. So, I thought it would be good to have your son tested again just in case.”

“But I don’t match. Are you saying my daughter does?”

“Yes. It can happen. It might just be a coincidence that their genetics match.”

Ye-na, who had quietly been listening to Ji-heon and the doctor’s conversation, asked,

“Dad, is that what genes are? The map in the blood?”

“Is that granddaughter you?”

The doctor turned his head and looked at Ye-na with a bright expression.

“Yes. There are similarities in the map in your blood that could help save Grandma.”

The doctor added to Ye-na’s question with further explanation.

“Are you going to save Grandma with the map in your blood?”

Ye-na asked again, and this time Ji-heon answered.

“That could be possible, but Ye-na can’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re still too young.”

Although the stem cell transplant procedure is lighter for the donor compared to a bone marrow transplant, it’s still not something that could comfortably be suggested for a young child. From a few days before the transplant, Ye-na would have to receive injections, and a considerable amount of blood would need to be drawn on the donation day.

It was a process that would be hard for a young child to endure. From the perspective of a father, who couldn’t predict what long-term effects all the procedures would have on his child, he couldn’t agree to her donating.

“Why? Didn’t Nightingale say to help sick people?”

But Ye-na insisted on questioning.

The doctor smiled at the child’s determination and explained the facts.

“Donations from unrelated individuals are only possible for those over 18, but donations between family members can be done by children as well.

There was a case in our hospital where an eight-year-old sibling donated stem cells to save their twelve-year-old brother.”

“Dad, they said I can do it!”

“No, still not allowed. Ye-na.”

“Why not?”

Ye-na asked again, clearly puzzled.

Ji-heon remained silent, his face stern. It was because he had a very smart child.

.....

Captivated by the fact that her blood could save her grandmother, Ye-na eventually sulked at her father’s objections. Even when they returned home, she insisted that she wouldn’t talk to him again. However, Ji-heon did not back down.

From Jung O’s perspective, Ji-heon’s decision was somewhat disappointing.

If the child wanted to, and if she took pride in the fact that she could save her grandmother…

Donating stem cells is not something that poses a significant threat to life. While there is some discomfort from having to receive injections and stay in the hospital for a few days, it’s a small sacrifice compared to other transplants.

“But… she could save her!”

“Still, we can’t put Ye-na in harm’s way.”

Jung O tried to persuade him, but it was futile.

Both Jeong Ji-heon and Jeong Ye-na had an unyielding stubbornness. As Jung O sulked, Ji-heon turned to leave but then came back to comfort her.

“Let’s talk again after my test results come back. If I can’t be the donor, we can look for someone else. There’s a one in twenty thousand chance that a stranger will have a matching genetic type. Your mother should be able to receive a transplant.”

One in twenty thousand. That number felt incredibly far-fetched to Jung O.

As she pouted, Guk-soon approached her.

“What’s going on? I heard there was a big issue at the hospital. Is that why you’re upset?”

“No, that’s all resolved…”

Jung O shared everything that had happened that day with Guk-soon. She explained the incident with Eun-yeob invading the hospital room, the serious situation Young-mi faced because of it, the matching tissue type between Ye-na and Young-mi, and that Ye-na wanted to donate her stem cells.

Guk-soon listened attentively to Jung O’s story and nodded thoughtfully.

“So, you’re saying that Ye-na’s donation is needed?”

“Stem cells.”

“Right. Stem cells.”

Nodding again, Guk-soon left the room, picked up her phone, and put on reading glasses. Jung O watched her intently. Guk-soon wore a serious expression as she searched for something on her phone.

After a moment, she took off her glasses and spoke with a brightened face.

“I found a way. Jung O.”

“…What?”

“There is a way. Everything will be okay. Our Ye-na won’t have to suffer.”

Her mother said there was a way.

Her mother’s words were never wrong.

Maybe that was why, even though Jung O didn’t know what the method was, her heart raced with anticipation.

“Everything will be fine. Your mother will be okay too.”

Trust your mother.

Guk-soon’s smile gave her a thrilling sense of certainty.

Ch157 - The Miracle Child

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Six years ago, on the morning of May 27.

There were still three weeks until the due date, but the amniotic sac had broken. Jung O felt her world go dark.

She didn’t even know how she managed to get to the hospital. If Guk-soon hadn’t been there, she probably wouldn’t have been able to do anything at all. She relied solely on her mother to get her to the hospital. Guk-soon had already packed a bag beforehand, so there was no confusion.

As soon as they arrived at the hospital, she changed clothes, took a urine test, underwent antibiotic testing, and had an internal examination… Time passed in a blur, and before she knew it, Jung O was lying in the delivery waiting room.

They said the progress of her labor was slow. The amniotic sac had broken, but the baby hadn’t descended. Reluctantly, she was given an oxytocin drip, and soon her stomach started to ache little by little. As the intensity increased, Jung O became more and more frightened.

“Mom, what should I do…?”

“It’s okay. It’s okay. You can do it. You’ll be fine.”

Guk-soon said firmly.

“What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do…?”

“You haven’t even started labor yet.”

“Then what am I supposed to do? It feels like it hurts already…”

“Just think of it as taking out a watermelon from your body.”

“…Mom, is that really something to say? I’m scared to death…”

“If you think of it as taking out a watermelon, it might feel a little less painful.”

Guk-soon replied casually and stood up. In truth, she was also very worried, but she pretended to be okay for her daughter, who was consumed by fear.

Seeing her daughter trembling with dry lips, Guk-soon wanted to fetch some water to moisten them, but Jung O grabbed her tightly.

“Mom, don’t go. Don’t go…”

“Just wait a bit.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m just going to get some water.”

“No, just stay by my side. I feel like the baby’s coming…”

Guk-soon had to stay put and do nothing because of Jung O’s frantic behavior.

The contractions were there, but time moved slowly. After a while, Jung O seemed to grow tired of pestering her mother and fell silent. During that time, Guk-soon held Jung O’s hand tightly and spoke about an important decision.

“I heard there’s a thing called umbilical cord blood banking. All my friends were giving money, saying they wanted to be the first to see their grandchild. So I went ahead and did it. I signed it in your name. That’s okay, right?”

“I don’t know. Just do what you think is best…”

Jung O responded vaguely due to the intermittent contractions and her fear of what was to come. Undeterred, Guk-soon continued her explanation, wanting to instill confidence in her daughter that the investment of one million won was worthwhile.

“In the past, they used to just throw away the baby’s umbilical cord, but I heard there’s something amazing in it. With the blood from it, they can treat incurable diseases. They used to treat leukemia with bone marrow transplants, but now they can do it with umbilical cord blood. Isn’t that amazing?”

“Mom, I’m in a lot of pain…”

“I hope you grow up healthy without any illness, but you never know. Our granddaughter doesn’t have any siblings, so if something serious happens later on, she’ll regret it if she’s unprepared. So, I decided to store it for 15 years. They say you can apply for an extension after 15 years. I did well, right?”

“Yeah, you did well, you did well…”

Jung O replied while sweating profusely. Guk-soon smiled proudly.

Soon, the intensity of the contractions increased significantly.

The longest seven hours of the two women’s lives.

After enduring the pain of labor, Jung O finally met her angel.

The baby was placed in Jung O’s arms as soon as she was born. Guk-soon captured the moment in a photograph.

The baby, born with a red mark on her forehead, looked like a truly beautiful angel who had come to kiss her.

It was amazing to see how her daughter, who had been acting like a child until the baby was born, suddenly seemed like an adult holding her baby. It filled her with pride, tenderness, and a sense of accomplishment.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

The umbilical cord blood bank sent text messages every year on Ye-na's birthday. Until now, Guk-soon had kept this information from Jung O because a million won was still a significant amount of money.

The stored umbilical cord blood is much more likely to go unused than used. She worried that her daughter might scold her for it.

Of course, it would be great if it never had to be used and they could live healthy lives, but if it could help the family in any way, it would be a proud and fortunate situation.

Umbilical cord blood can be used by the individual, parents, grandparents, and siblings, so if their tissue types match, Young-mi could also receive a donation.

"That happened, but you don't even remember it, right?"

Guk-soon chuckled as she recalled the story from six years ago.

"Mom!"

Jung O hugged Guk-soon tightly, tears welling in her eyes.

"How could our Mrs. Lee Guk-soon be so wise? You're the smartest in the world, Mom!"

Smooch, smooch, smooch.

"You used to call me a sweet potato."

"Mom, sweet potatoes are my favorite thing in the world. You can make anything delicious with sweet potatoes."

Smooch, smooch, smooch, smooch.

"Oh my! Gross. Go away!"

“I’ll go get Jung Seobang!”

After kissing Guk-soon’s cheek about ten times, Jung O was pushed away and flapped her arms as she went to the bedroom.

As she opened the bedroom door, she saw Ji-heon sitting there with a blank expression. He looked a bit pitiful.

“Oppa.”

“Yeah.”

Even so, when Jung O called him, he smiled gently.

“Mom has something to say.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“Yeah. I had to tell her.”

Hoo. Ji-heon sighed deeply as he stood up, his face looking more troubled. He appeared dignified and resolute, showing a determination not to yield to Guk-soon’s altruistic persuasion.

“Mother.”

Just as expected, Ji-heon spoke before Guk-soon could even start.

“If Ye-na insists, there’s nothing we can do. She probably doesn’t realize how difficult it is. To donate, she’ll have to get an injection of hematopoietic growth factor four days before. She’ll need to be hospitalized and have a large amount of blood drawn. I doubt my father would want that for her either.”

Seeing her husband speak so calmly without showing any emotion, Jung O let out a secret sigh. His words were convincing.

“Oppa, that’s not it.”

Jung O interjected.

Guk-soon smiled gently and placed her phone in front of Ji-heon. His gaze dropped down. There was a text message on the phone that Guk-soon had shown him. It was an old message.

– ○○Umbilical Cord Blood Bank. We sincerely congratulate you on your child's birthday. The umbilical cord blood you entrusted to us is being safely stored.

Ji-heon picked up the phone unknowingly, trying to understand the message.

"I didn't expect anything like this, but I applied for umbilical cord blood storage when Ye-na was born. The umbilical cord blood bank sends a text every year to say they're keeping it safe."

"…"

"You can use this. Ye-na can also receive a donation. Ye-na doesn't have to go through hardship."

Even with Guk-soon's explanation, Ji-heon found it hard to believe.

Before Jung O called him, Ji-heon sat quietly in the bedroom, lost in thought, feeling a sting in his chest.

If it's something I can do, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

Why can't I donate? My daughter can, but why can't I?

But there was nothing he could do. He couldn't bear to see his young daughter suffering again because of his own mother.

He thought it would be prudent to slowly prepare for the inevitable goodbye that everyone must face if a donor didn't appear. He was trying to convey that firm intention.

It was a miracle he had never even imagined.

“…No, no…”

Ji-heon stammered, uncharacteristically flustered and with tears brimming in his eyes.

“My mother… she doesn’t deserve….”

How could my mother have treated Jung O the way she did? And how had she treated Ye-na?

He thought it was inevitable that his mother-in-law, Jung O, and Ye-na would harbor resentment toward his mother for the rest of their lives.

Guk-soon reached out and placed her hand on Ji-heon’s knee.

“Deserving means you have the same genetic type as Ye-na. The fact that you’re her grandmother means you’re eligible to receive the donation.”

“…”

“If it can be used for something good, everyone will feel proud. Just think of how happy and proud Ye-na will be. Isn’t that right?”

Ji-heon bowed his head like a sinner, unable to say anything. A thick tear dropped down his cheek, and he quickly covered his face.

Ye-na, who had declared a break from her father and was holed up in her room, cautiously emerged. Her eyes widened in surprise at the scene unfolding in the living room. She tiptoed closer to Jung O and whispered in her ear.

“Mom, is Dad crying?”

“It seems like it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s because our Ye-na is upset?”

Jung O replied playfully.

Ye-na slowly approached and wrapped her arms around Ji-heon’s neck, who had his head bowed.

“Dad, don’t cry. I’ll take back what I said about not talking to you anymore.”

Ji-heon gently took hold of her small arms.

What a gem of a child.

I want to give you so much, but I feel so guilty for only receiving.

.*. *. *. *. *. *.

The next day, Ji-heon and Jung O informed Jae-gwang that Ye-na’s umbilical cord blood was being stored.

“What should we do? How can we…?”

Jae-gwang’s reaction was no different from Ji-heon’s.

“No, how can we… How can we accept something so precious…?”

“Because it’s precious. I hope you accept it and get better soon.”

Jung O had to persuade Jae-gwang, who felt too guilty to accept. Finally, Jae-gwang trembled as he grasped Jung O’s hand.

“I don’t know how to express my gratitude to you, to Ye-na, and to our son-in-law. I feel so sorry, yet all I can do is be thankful…”

Jung O felt embarrassed by Jae-gwang’s trembling grasp on her hand.

They decided not to inform Young-mi about the umbilical cord blood donation for now. They thought that if she found out in advance, she would feel a huge burden. Young-mi would believe that a donor had appeared and would be grateful.

As they left the hospital, Jung O shrugged her shoulders and said, “Aren’t you glad you married me?”

Her voice, lifted in a teasing tone, sounded endearingly sweet to Ji-heon.

“Right? Aren’t you glad to have met me?”

“Do you think I only think that way at times like this?”

It seemed that his wife still didn’t fully grasp how much he loved her.

“I think about it all the time.”

Even without situations like this, you are my salvation and my miracle.

You always will be.

Ji-heon stopped in his tracks and pulled Jung O in closer.

“Uh? Oppa, people will see.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“…”

“Didn’t you want me to brag about meeting Lee Jung O like this?”

With breath tickling her near her lips, Jung O smiled brightly. Ji-heon pressed his lips against hers deeply, as if he truly wanted to boast to the world.

Ch158 - Thanks to You

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Young-mi continued her chemotherapy as scheduled. Despite the grueling process of having a catheter inserted directly into her vein to administer strong medication, she managed to endure it well.

The goal was to reduce the leukemia cells in her bone marrow to under 5%, and after the treatment, she received a diagnosis of complete remission. With a favorable prognosis, she was now able to undergo a hematopoietic stem cell transplant without any further worries.

The fact that Ye-na's umbilical cord blood would be used remained a secret among the family. They refrained from visiting Young-mi, especially since the honest and pure Ye-na might accidentally reveal the truth.

They were also cautious about letting the news of Young-mi's illness leak outside, knowing it wouldn't help the situation.

As time dragged on anxiously but slowly in their minds, the world outside the window rushed forward, reaching the peak of autumn. Trees in the city proudly displayed their colorful yellow and red leaves, reminding everyone of the season.

Inside Jung O's womb, time passed steadily as well. After seeing a video of the baby curled up and flailing its limbs inside her, Ji-heon became even more protective of Jung O.

The members of Team 2 at Max Planning were no different. Like the fate of an advertising agency, they had to prepare for yet another competitive presentation, which made them worry that Jung O might overexert herself.

After the meeting, when Jung O got up first to tidy up, Assistant Manager Go Eun-joo glanced at her and said casually, “Just leave it. I’ll finish what I’m working on.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

“Just go. That’s what eases my mind.”

Though her expression was sullen and her tone dry, her words were filled with affection. Jung O playfully squinted her eyes, stretched her lips into a long smile, and teased.

“Assistant Manager Go? Are you in love with me?”

Eun-joo scoffed, as if she didn’t see the need to respond, and continued her work. Jung O found her reaction even more amusing.

“If this isn’t love, then what is?”

“Oh, how charming you are. Save that for your husband.”

“Assistant Manager Go, I don’t do this with my husband. It’s just for you.”

Winking and showing a finger heart, Jung O made Eun-joo shake her head in annoyance.

Sometimes, Jung O’s playful antics left Eun-joo’s head spinning.

Because of Lee Jung O, my well-constructed heart was being shaken.

Eun-joo felt embarrassed by this change within herself.

At that moment, Ki-hun entered the conference room and joined in on teasing Eun-joo further.

“Come on, Assistant Manager Go, please accept this love from this Assistant Manager!”

“Song Ki-hun, enough already!”

Eun-joo shot a glare at Ki-hun, but he just chuckled.

Before Jung O arrived, Ki-hun had found Eun-joo the most difficult and intimidating person in the team. Her cold demeanor, devoid of warm words or encouragement, made it hard to approach Assistant Manager Go Eun-joo, and he had feared her the most, even as his senior.

But now, thanks to Jung O, he had formed a close camaraderie with Eun-joo.

“I’ll take care of this. Assistant Manager Go, take your time,” Ki-hun offered.

He busily tidied up while Jung O stood up to help him. They left the conference room, leaving only Eun-joo, who was focused on her urgent tasks.

As they closed the door to the conference room, Ki-hun said in a low voice, “Before this Assistant Manager came, Assistant Manager Go seemed so intimidating and difficult, but now it feels really comfortable.”

Eun-joo had changed. Jung O nodded in agreement.

After taking a few steps, they heard a clattering noise from somewhere. It was in the hallway where the director’s office was clearly visible.

Ki-hun quickly took a half step away from Jung O to maintain a safe distance. This was a reflex honed by the watchful eye of Director Ji-heon, who would glare at Ki-hun whenever he engaged in friendly conversation with Jung O.

Once Again, Ji-heon Appeared

“Director, hello.”

As expected, Ji-heon appeared without fail. Ki-hun, who had already moved a half-step away from Jung O, stiffened up and greeted him nervously.

“Assistant Manager, I’ll quickly go and return the equipment.”

As if anticipating that Ji-heon might say something harsh, Ki-hun immediately excused himself. Before Jung O could stop him, he hurried away.

Ji-heon naturally took the seat beside Jung O and walked alongside her. Jung O lowered her eyelids and looked at Ji-heon with indifference before asking a question.

“Are you really not going to work?”

“I’m working right now.”

“There’s a lot more work at the headquarters or at Saerun Foods. Dad has called you several times; are you really going to stay here?”

A few weeks ago, Jae-gwang had expressed his worries to Jung O, saying that Ji-heon never listened to his father. He wanted to see his son working properly at the group headquarters or at Saerun Foods before retiring, believing that Ji-heon would do well if he worked seriously. It was frustrating that he rarely showed up.

Jung O respected Ji-heon’s desire to maintain a work-life balance. However, she thought it was essential for him to avoid becoming complacent or a manager stuck in a rut, relying solely on his wealth.

In response to Jung O’s sharp question, Ji-heon replied lazily.

“I like Max Planning.”

“Do you really like Max Planning?”

“Really, I do.”

“Then what if I change jobs?”

“Why would you change jobs? You’re my wife; you should be at Saerun Group, not going anywhere else.”

“That doesn’t make sense. I need to go where I can develop my skills.”

Ji-heon raised his eyebrows at Jung O’s heartless declaration.

“What will you do if I quit my job? Hmm? Jeong Ji-heon?”

“…I’ll have to go, too.”

“What?”

“I’ll follow you.”

“You said you liked Max Planning.”

“I meant I like advertising companies.”

“Then what if I say I’m going to transfer to Saerun Foods?”

“Then I’ll start to like Saerun Foods.”

I’ll follow you forever.

His true feelings were transparently revealed.

What a clingy person.

Dumbfounded by Ji-heon’s answer, Jung O stopped in her tracks and pointed her finger at him.

“Don’t think about following me; do something you can do independently. Make your own achievements, okay?”

After fiercely pointing at him, Jung O turned around, stiffening her shoulders and distancing herself from Ji-heon. Left behind, Ji-heon felt a bit disappointed.

It’s not always necessary for a person’s motivation to be solely about the work itself. It doesn’t have to be about achieving personal glory. Do I really have to create my own achievements without you? Without you, I might not even be a complete person.

The things he couldn’t say to Jung O lingered in Ji-heon’s mind throughout the day.

“Dad!”

The child approached Ji-heon, who was sulking at home. Seeing the child’s bright face eased his expression for a moment.

Ye-na plopped down on her dad’s lap, asking, “Dad, do you know what day Sunday is?”

“What day is it?”

“It’s Dad’s birthday!”

Ahhh. Ji-heon’s mouth dropped open as he mentally counted the days. With all of Jung O’s schedules and the company’s tasks filling his head, he almost forgot about his own birthday.

He hadn’t celebrated his birthday in years. It had passed with just a congratulatory phone call from his mother and a small gift from Seung-kyu.

“Dad, is there a present you want from Ye-na?”

“Well, how about Ye-na’s kiss?”

“Not that!”

Ye-na shook her head. Somehow, it seemed like she had a present prepared already. However, it was hard to guess what the hidden gift could be, given her determined expression.

After wearing a triumphant smile for a while, Ye-na spoke again.

“Dad, you love Ye-na the most, right?”

“Of course. Without a doubt.”

“Then for your birthday, I’ll play with you!”

“How will you play with me?”

“I’ll take you camping together. That’ll work, right?”

Gulp.

As expected, the child had something she wanted. Ji-heon desperately held back the laughter that was about to escape his lips.

“Dad, won’t you be super happy?”

“Yeah, I’ll be super happy.”

“I knew it!”

Feeling proud of herself for coming up with such a fantastic gift, Ye-na beamed with joy.

“Thank you, my daughter.”

“Don’t mention it. But Dad, we need to hurry up and prepare for camping.”

“What do we need to prepare for camping?”

“I don’t know. Ask Uncle Dobin.”

After finishing her words, Ye-na got down from Ji-heon’s lap and went to her room.

Ji-heon smiled again and picked up his phone. It seemed daunting to prepare for camping since he had never been before, but he felt reassured that his daughter had already provided a solution.

“Hey, why?”

When he called Seung-kyu, he heard his friend’s tired voice along with Do-yoon’s cries in the background. It sounded like he was in the middle of

parenting.

Ji-heon quickly stated his purpose.

“I’m planning to go camping this Saturday. What do I need to prepare?”

“Did you reserve the campsite?”

“No.”

“Then you can’t go. If it’s this Saturday, the campsites are probably all booked.”

“Already?”

“You should have made the reservation at least a month ago. This is the perfect season; what’s left?”

Ji-heon felt a cloud of despair wash over him. He had been imagining setting up a palace-like tent at the campsite and grilling meat with Ye-na, and now he felt hopeless.

Seeing Ji-heon’s state, Seung-kyu offered a clever solution.

“Why not go to Jin-seo’s parents’ place? The air is good there, and the yard is really spacious, perfect for setting up a tent and playing. We do that often.”

“No, but Ye-na is looking forward to it.”

“There are mountains, fields, and the sea. It’s better than any campsite. You can practice there and then prepare properly for next time.”

“……”

“Hey, camping requires preparation. Don’t take it lightly. There’s a lot to prepare and learn, especially for a dad taking kids with him! You can’t be clumsy at the campsite; you have to be a source of pride for the kids.”

Seung-kyu, with three years of camping experience, earnestly explained why Ji-heon should go to Jin-seo's parents' place.

"…Okay, then can I lean on you a bit?"

"Lean? It's nothing. Everyone will be happy."

"Alright, let's go together. Thanks."

"Don't mention it, we're friends. I'm busy, so I'll go now."

Just before Seung-kyu pressed the call end button, it sounded like he said something to Do-bin beside him. Ji-heon could hear Do-bin's excited voice shouting, "Wow!" The ringing of the phone made Ji-heon feel like he had fallen into a trap set by Seung-kyu.

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As time passed, Saturday morning arrived at the hospital ward.

After receiving a hematopoietic stem cell transplant and starting post-treatment, Young-mi was attached to various IV drips. The doctor encouraged her, saying the donor's stem cells were matching well with the patient.

"You should be able to be discharged in a few days."

Jae-gwang said as he opened the curtains in the hospital room. Just a few days ago, she had felt nauseous at the sight of sunlight, but now her condition had improved significantly.

Looking at his wife, who could now smile at the sunlight, Jae-gwang asked her, "How do you feel today?"

"Not bad."

"Will you be able to meet the kids?"

"I have to. Tomorrow is Ji-heon's birthday."

Even while lying down, Young-mi was keeping track of the dates accurately. Tomorrow was her son’s birthday—a day she could never forget.

“The donor came through so that our son can celebrate his birthday without any trouble.”

“Will you be able to see the donor? It would be nice to give them a gift.”

“That’s possible. It’s someone I know.”

Seeing Young-mi show interest, Jae-gwang quickly replied. It was time to tell the truth.

“…Who is it?”

Young-mi’s voice trembled as she asked.

There had been moments when she thought it was impossible that the donor had appeared so quickly. Was the donor really their son? There had been times when she had coldly turned her back, saying she wouldn’t see her mother again, but was it really the case? As she waited for Jae-gwang’s answer, tears welled up in her throat.

“It’s Ye-na. Your granddaughter, Ye-na.”

However, Jae-gwang’s answer was unexpected. It wasn’t Ji-heon.

Young-mi blinked, wondering if she had misheard. Her blinking eyes quickly became moist.

“You survived because of your granddaughter.”

Ch159 - Happy Birthday!

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Young-mi’s jaw dropped in disbelief. A hoarse sound escaped from her loosely parted lips.

“…How…”

She had never even thought about it. Of course, she had never wished for it either.

Young-mi’s face turned red, and she struggled to catch her breath.

“…How could this happen…”

She understood well the hardship that stem cell donors endured. That’s why she felt an endless gratitude and guilt towards someone she had never met. Even if her son had donated, that guilt and gratitude would not vanish.

But it wasn’t just her son; it was her granddaughter who had saved her.

“Why… why did this happen?”

Why had she allowed it?

It felt as if the pain in her chest was starting again, tightening her heart. She resented her illness.

There was no way a seven-year-old child could have breezed through all the procedures. She must have endured pain that was incomparable to what adults experienced while undergoing tests, getting injections, and having blood drawn.

“What is Ye-na… doing now?”

Young-mi clutched her chest as she asked.

Why? Why on earth did this happen? Why hadn’t anyone stopped it?

“Ye-na didn’t suffer.”

To reassure her, Jae-gwang responded with a calm expression.

“What do you mean she didn’t suffer?”

“Your in-laws foresaw the future. When Ye-na was born, they applied to store her umbilical cord blood. You received that umbilical cord blood.”

While Jae-gwang explained, Young-mi’s mouth hung open in shock.

“We should be grateful not only to Ye-na but also to our daughter-in-law and your in-laws who stored Ye-na’s umbilical cord blood.”

Heavy tears, resembling guilt, filled Young-mi’s eyes.

She had done something unforgivable to her daughter-in-law. And to her son as well.

It would have also left a significant scar on her only granddaughter and her in-laws.

All she felt was remorse for them. There was no chance of recovery.

The nurse, unaware of the family situation, praised Young-mi for saving her granddaughter despite her illness, saying Ye-na would be grateful.

But Young-mi knew that wasn’t the case. If it hadn’t been for her long-standing mistakes, none of this would have happened in the first place. There wouldn’t have been an incident where Cha Eun-yeob invaded the hospital room.

From the beginning, it was all an event caused by her mistakes. It wasn't her granddaughter who should be grateful; it was she who should feel sorry for her granddaughter.

Could she, who had denied her granddaughter's existence just a few months ago, truly accept such a precious gift?

"In fact, if it weren't for the umbilical cord blood, Ye-na might have insisted on donating herself. Despite everyone's concerns, that little girl was determined to donate to you."

Tears finally streamed down her cheeks at Jae-gwang's continued words.

Sniffle. Sniffle.

Tears were suffocating her, making it difficult to swallow. As if he sensed her feelings, Jae-gwang gently rubbed her back and continued speaking softly.

"Get well soon. You need to recover quickly and show your precious granddaughter that you're okay. She gave you such a valuable gift, so you must be healthy."

Sniffle.

"Thank you, and I should say I'm sorry directly."

Sniffle.

"I need to repay you by living a long and healthy life. Right?"

While Jae-gwang gently comforted her, Young-mi couldn't say a word.

She felt ashamed of her past, where she had wronged others without knowing how to repent. Her once high pride felt embarrassing.

At nearly sixty years old, she hadn't even possessed the grace of a six-year-old child.

She was ashamed of her wasted life.

She felt incredibly sorry.

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At the same time, two cars set off for a seaside village.

An interesting point was that Dobin had decided to accompany Jihun's family instead of taking his own family car.

"Dobin, why did you leave your car and come with us?" Jihun asked, as if it were obvious.

"I want to play with Ye-na!"

"Isn't it because you want to play?"

"Actually, that works too!"

Dobin replied cheerfully.

It was likely a phrase he had just learned, but he used it so aptly that Jihun and Jeong-o burst into laughter.

Jeong-o recalled a snippet of a conversation she had with Ye-na just a few months ago.

"Mom, Dobin is going camping with you, Dad, and Doyoon."

"Does our Ye-na want to go camping too?"

"No, I just mentioned it. You're busy, right?"

"Even if I'm busy, I can go. Since summer is too hot, let's go in the fall."

Ye-na, who had hidden her true feelings, had been overjoyed by Jeong-o's positive response and had boasted to Dobin. Now, that memory of watching her daughter with a bittersweet feeling was in the past.

As they drove away from the gray city, the car gradually moved toward the vibrant colors of the seaside. The season they welcomed each year felt new. Jeong-o smiled gently at the scenery she had never imagined last fall.

In the backseat, the sound of the children chattering never ceased. If Ye-na were alone, she would surely have whined about being bored and fallen asleep as soon as they got in the car, but with the two kids together, the conversation flowed continuously.

Sometimes the kids raised their voices, making it a bit chaotic, but it made for an entertaining drive.

After about three hours of driving, they arrived at the quiet seaside village. Jin-seo’s parents were waiting at the door to greet them.

“Grandma! Grandpa!”

Dobin jumped out of the car and ran over.

“Oh my! Our little prince has arrived!”

In Seoul, the mischievous troublemaker was treated like a prince here. Dobin laughed and hugged his grandfather. Seung-kyu unloaded the luggage and greeted them.

“Mother, Father. It’s nice to see you.”

“Right, right. It must have been hard to get here?”

Jihun, who had walked over, also bowed politely.

“Hello. I’m Jeong Jihun.”

“Nice to meet you. Come in.”

“Thank you for inviting us.”

“We’re grateful you came.”

Jihun’s greeting brought a warm smile to Jin-seo’s mother, who then walked over. A familiar face appeared.

It was a lady who, six years ago, had run a restaurant in the same market where she operated a flower shop in Seoul. She was known for her excellent cooking and virtuous character, quickly becoming well-known in the area for her home-style cooking.

Jin-seo’s mother approached Kook-soon and warmly took her hand.

“Lady! It’s so nice to see you!”

“Indeed. It’s amazing how our paths are connected like this.”

“I was so surprised when I heard from Jin-seo. My goodness! We’ve become in-laws like this!”

“Not quite yet.”

Jihun suddenly interjected into the warm greeting.

Everyone’s eyes widened in surprise, looking at Jihun as if cold water had been poured over them.

Jin-seo’s mother had merely made a traditional Korean comment about their connection. Just as one would call a restaurant lady “auntie” or refer to a friend’s father as “father-in-law,” she was jokingly saying that since Jihun and Jeong-o were connected, Seung-kyu’s family was now also related to Jeong-o.

However, Jihun misunderstood and frowned, thinking they were trying to arrange a match between Ye-na and Dobin.

Everyone blinked at Jihun. As he gradually realized his verbal blunder, a flush crept onto his face.

Oh, what to do now.

Jeong-o, who quickly caught on to Jihun's intention, felt a cold sweat form on her forehead. She wanted to find a mouse hole to shove Jihun into. Jeong-o quickly stepped forward.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Jeong-o. Ye-na, you should greet them too."

"Hello."

"So, you're Ye-na! Oh, what a princess! Thank you for being friends with our Dobin."

As Ye-na was called over to say hello, everyone's attention swiftly shifted to her. Jeong-o let out a secret sigh of relief. She noticed Jihun, with his ears flushed, subtly stepping back.

"Jihun, you might want to kick yourself under the covers later."

Jeong-o found Jihun amusing.

Jihun's family received a warm welcome. After a satisfying lunch, Jihun and Seung-kyu set up their base in the yard. Being new to everything, Jihun followed Seung-kyu's advice well.

Thanks to that, they managed to pitch the tent without much trouble. As soon as the large tent was completed, the kids rolled around inside, thrilled.

Jihun even set up a comfortable chair for Jeong-o. Sitting in the chair that Jihun had prepared, Jeong-o enjoyed a yogurt. Now three months pregnant, she still looked slim.

You could only see her slightly rounded belly when she wore fitted clothes. However, Jeong-o instinctively became cautious. Fearing rapid weight gain due to morning sickness, she ate small amounts frequently.

Jihun sat beside her, gazing at Jeong-o intently. For Jeong-o, the time to eat was a moment of healing, while for Jihun, watching Jeong-o was healing.

A spoonful of yogurt meant for Jeong-o slipped and fell onto her slightly protruding belly. Seeing her push her belly out a bit more to wipe away the

yogurt stain with her fingertips made Jihun chuckle unconsciously.

At Jihun’s reaction, Jeong-o narrowed her eyes.

“Did you just laugh?”

“No, you just look pretty.”

“It sounds like you laughed because it was funny.”

“No, I laughed because you’re cute.”

“Either way, you did laugh.”

With Jeong-o’s pointed remark, Jihun’s laughter faded away.

“Do you know how frustrating it is to have a growing belly? If it gets bigger here, I won’t even be able to trim my toenails properly. Will you still laugh then?”

“I can help you trim your toenails.”

“It’s frustrating that I have to entrust something so important to you!”

From a distance, Jin-seo watched Jeong-o reprimanding Jihun with interest. Seung-kyu approached Jin-seo.

“What’s going on?”

“Jihun laughed when he saw yogurt fall on Jeong-o’s belly.”

“Oh my. How could he?”

Seung-kyu looked at Jihun as if he were a great criminal. Jihun felt wronged; he had only laughed because his wife was adorable.

This time, Seung-kyu egged Jihun on.

“Why don’t you apologize?”

“…I’m sorry.”

Jihun had no choice but to apologize to Jeong-o.

“Okay. I’ll forgive you just this once.”

Jeong-o replied, lowering her eyelids haughtily.

A long sigh of relief escaped from Jihun’s lips.

Seung-kyu secretly laughed.

Even the great Jeong Jihun can’t do anything against his wife.

This is the first time I’ve seen my friend like this.

Seung-kyu found it incredibly amusing and satisfying.

In the afternoon, they took the kids to the beach and dug for clams in the tidal flats. Dobin, who had experience digging in the mudflats, showed Ye-na how to dig for clams.

“Ye-na, look at this. There’s a hole in the ground here. That’s where the clams breathe. If we dig here with this hoe, we can find clams.”

“Wow! That’s amazing!”

Dobin, who was able to show off something he was good at, puffed up with pride. He worked harder than ever to dig for clams.

“Oh my! This little one is digging for clams like a worker!”

An adult passing by admired the pile of clams that Dobin had collected. Dobin had gathered far more clams than Jihun. While Ye-na was first in the Go academy, Dobin was the champion in the tidal flats.

After returning from the tidal flats with their clams, they lit a fire in the yard and grilled meat. On one side, the clams they had caught were

cooking. The children opened their mouths wide as they watched the clam shells open.

Having eaten their fill, the kids stared blankly at the crackling fire, gradually becoming quieter. Dobin, who had burned with enthusiasm in the tidal flats today, fell asleep first. Ye-na also couldn't fight her heavy eyelids and fell asleep in Jihun's arms.

"Let's take them inside and lay them down."

Jeong-o said this because she felt sorry for Jihun, who was still holding the child.

"Okay, I got it."

Even after agreeing, Jihun didn't move for a long time. His eyes were filled with tenderness as he looked at the sleeping child.

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"Dad! Daddd!"

Ye-na's loud shouting woke Jihun from his slumber. But he was still half-asleep. He barely opened his eyes and checked the time on his phone.

It was 6 AM. Too early in the morning. No, it was still dawn.

It's Sunday. Dad is still tired, Ye-na.

However, Ye-na, unaware of Jihun's exhaustion, climbed up onto his waist.

Is this the fate of being a dad?

Jihun, now Ye-na's toy, was shaken around like a powerless twig under her relentless demands. Yet, he still couldn't fully wake up. Finally, Ye-na pinched his closed eyes open with her fingers.

"Haah. Ye-na…"

“Happy birthday, Dad!”

But he couldn’t complain. The bright sound of the child’s voice awakened him to the day.

It felt like a drop of dew swelling on a leaf, bursting with the morning sunlight.

“Today is Dad’s birthday, so Ye-na is the happiest!”

Ch160 - It’s Not Too Late Yet

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“Happy birthday, Dad! Wake up quickly!”

Sometimes, the sparrow-like child wakes up before me and tries to rouse me.

There are mornings when the name “Dad,” which the child habitually calls out, feels unfamiliar.

The time spent living as a child’s father has been much shorter than the time spent alone, so in dreams, I might take on a carefree form, only to scramble back to my true self when morning comes. The word “Dad” still feels strange but also magical.

I became a father because of those I love.

This was my first birthday as a dad.

For Jihun, it was the beginning of a new life.

He raised his arms to pull Ye-na close and turned his body to the side. Ye-na, who had been sprawled across the bed like a playground plane, was gently guided to the floor by Jihun’s arm.

Ye-na laughed joyfully, as if she were on a ride at an amusement park. Jihun embraced her laughter, holding it close to him.

As he became more alert, memories of Ye-na’s birthday suddenly came rushing back.

It was before he knew anything about Ye-na. He couldn’t honestly express his feelings to Jeong-o, who he was drawn to endlessly, and acted sulky out of jealousy. He behaved harshly, wanting to keep her by his side late into the night. He didn’t realize how much he made her worry, only fulfilling his own selfish desires that day.

Later, he learned that day was Ye-na’s birthday, and he felt an immense regret.

How many more regrets and reflections would he have?

“Let’s not celebrate Dad’s birthday; let’s celebrate Ye-na’s birthday instead.”

Jihun said, holding Ye-na tightly.

“No! It’s Dad’s birthday! You’re suffocating me!”

Ye-na twisted away, unable to withstand Jihun’s embrace.

Thanks to their cheerful morning wrestling, Jihun felt his mind clearing. After waking up in the seaside village, he could almost hear the sound of the waves if he listened closely.

Since Jeong-o and Guk-soon were sleeping in a separate room at Jin-seo’s house, only Jihun and Ye-na were in the tent. It was still dawn, so they couldn’t run around loudly in the yard.

“Shall we go see the ocean, Dad?”

“Yeah!”

Jihun dressed Ye-na warmly and stepped out of the tent with her.

“Ye-na!”

As soon as Ye-na came out, Dobin also emerged from the tent to greet her. Dobin was up early too. Seung-kyu followed, with sleepy eyes and a messy hairstyle.

“Dobin! We’re going to see the ocean; come with us!”

“Okay!”

As Jihun and Ye-na took their stroll, Dobin and Seung-kyu joined them. Holding the children’s hands, they walked as the bluish hue of dawn began to fade. After walking for a while, the sound of waves, carried by the morning breeze, began to grow closer. Ye-na shouted when she saw the ocean.

“Huh? Dad! The tidal flats are gone!”

Because it was high tide, the area that had been mudflats yesterday was now filled with seawater. The rising water made the ocean look quite different from the day before. Dobin appeared even more surprised.

“Did I take all the clams, so the tidal flats disappeared?”

“Seems like it.”

“What do we do now?”

“We have to ask the ocean to return the tidal flats.”

At Seung-kyu’s playful response, Dobin put his hands together in prayer.

“Now I won’t catch clams anymore! Please bring back the tidal flats!”

“Since Dobin prayed, the tidal flats will be back soon.”

While Seung-kyu teased his son, Jihun shared a serious explanation with Ye-na.

“The tidal flats didn’t disappear; the seawater just rose. After some time, the water will recede, and you’ll see the tidal flats you saw yesterday.”

“After some time?”

“Yeah. After some time.”

“How long will it take?”

“Probably by lunchtime.”

“Then let’s come back at lunchtime!”

“Okay. Let’s do that.”

There are no correct answers in parenting. Both children and parents are all different.

Even after suggesting to come back, Ye-na lingered and played for a while longer. The children took off their shoes, stepping into the water, then retreating from the large waves. Ye-na giggled, saying the waves tickled her feet.

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At the same time.

In the kitchen of Jin-seo’s family home, preparations for breakfast were in full swing. Since Jeong-o, who was pregnant, and Jin-seo were precious daughters, the elders unexpectedly found themselves working the hardest to prepare Jihun’s birthday feast.

As Guk-soon was making seaweed soup, Jin-seo’s mother approached her kindly.

“I heard from Jin-seo that you’re studying these days. I heard you passed the written exam on your first try.”

“That’s true, but there’s so much to learn for the practical exam. Even having cooked my whole life, everything feels new to me.”

Guk-soon shyly expressed her realistic difficulties.

“Trying to study later in life makes me feel like I can’t keep up, and I often think it’s too late for me.”

After nodding at Guk-soon’s concerns for a moment, Jin-seo’s mother spoke.

“Here, they call me the newlywed. It’s not teasing; the people in this neighborhood really think I’m young. I’m the youngest around here.”

“……”

“How do you feel when you hear ‘newlywed’? Even at this age, I want to be spoiled and treated sweetly.”

Everything in the world depends on how one thinks.

Just as the mischievous Dobin grows more mature when praised, Jihun, who once seemed like a naive young man, has transformed into a good father, a good husband, and a reliable son-in-law.

“It’s still not too late. What’s there to worry about for someone as lovely as you? You can take your time and go step by step; nothing is too late.”

“……”

“With your cooking skills and experience, it seems like you should be teaching students, yet you’re continuously learning and challenging yourself. That’s so admirable; you look amazing to me.”

Guk-soon felt energized by Jin-seo’s mother’s encouragement. It was a morning filled with gratitude for having the fortune to gain wisdom from a good relationship.

Soon, Jihun and Ye-na returned from the beach, and a grand birthday feast was set up in the living room. After enjoying a happy meal filled with everyone’s blessings, Jihun approached Guk-soon.

“Mother-in-law, thank you. That was the most delicious seaweed soup I’ve ever had.”

“……”

“But it’s always like this, Mother-in-law; your food is always the best.”

She felt proud of her son-in-law’s gratitude.

Guk-soon thought to herself. Right now must be the most beautiful moment in my life.

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This birthday, which flowed like an ordinary day, felt like a noisy festive occasion this year. Jihun, who thought he would be happy just giving love to his family, realized that receiving love felt just as delightful.

After the birthday party, receiving gifts from Seung-kyu’s family, and wandering around with the kids, time had flown by.

Before long, it was time to head home. After saying goodbye to the friends they had grown close to, they set off. In the car back to Seoul, Ye-na and Dobin sang, “Let’s come again!” the entire way.

As the car made its way to Seoul amidst the children’s chatter, it felt a bit chaotic. By the time they parted ways with Dobin’s family and returned home, the world had darkened. Ye-na had dinner and fell asleep right away, and Guk-soon also went to bed early.

Jihun quietly followed Jeong-o around, looking for an opportunity. He had something in mind.

He still hadn’t received a gift from Jeong-o. She had been quite busy lately, so she probably hadn’t had the chance to prepare a gift. That situation was useful for Jihun.

‘Where’s my gift? Where is my gift?’

‘Oh no… what should I do?’

‘You didn’t prepare a gift either? Hmph.’

‘I’m sorry, Oppa. Instead, I’ll give you myself as a gift.’

‘Hmph. Then prepare yourself.’

Imagining the desired scenario in his head, Jihun approached Jeong-o and asked.

“Where’s my gift? Where is it?”

“Wait a moment.”

“You didn’t prepare a gift either?”

“Ta-da!”

But it was different from Jihun’s expectations. As soon as Jihun asked about the gift, Jeong-o quickly pulled a box out from under the bed. Jihun, who had been smiling with anticipation, suddenly felt his face stiffen.

“Open it quickly.”

As Jihun opened the box, urged by Jeong-o’s excited voice, his blank expression turned into a sulky one.

The gift prepared by Jeong-o was, after all, food for thought—books. *“Leadership for Leading Organizations,” “110 Leadership Tips for Bosses,” “Smart Leadership Saves the Company”*, and other titles that were clearly intentional…

“So you thought I was lacking, huh? My leadership skills.”

“I’ll really grab hold of you.”

“I bought this for you because I thought it might help you. Believe it or not, I really picked these out carefully. Out of all those leadership books, this is the best one.”

“Hmph.”

“Hey, don’t you like the gift?”

“No, I like it very much. So you should prepare yourself.”

“Huh?”

“Since you gave me a gift that I really like, I should give something back too.”

Even if the situation turned out differently than expected, Jihun’s destination remained the same. The smile on Jeong-o’s face, which had been slightly mischievous, suddenly froze. Jihun took her cheek in his large hand and lightly tickled her chin with his fingers, causing her eyes to tense up.

“I studied a bit, so it wouldn’t be burdensome for you and our little heartthrob…”

He had even studied for moments like this.

Drrr. Drrr.

Jihun’s plan to wrap up the birthday celebration was interrupted by the intrusion of civilization.

His phone, carelessly left on the bed, began to ring. Jeong-o was the first to recognize the name on the screen—Jihun’s father, Jaekwang. She picked up the phone and handed it to Jihun. He sighed heavily before answering.

“Hello, Father.”

[Oh, right. Um…] “……”

[Happy birthday.] Jaekwang awkwardly wished him a happy birthday. Hearing his father’s shy voice made Jihun’s lips stretch into a long smile.

He didn’t have many memories of receiving birthday wishes from his father. It seemed Jaekwang had called instead of his sick mother, Yeong-mi.

“Thank you.”

[Your mother wants you to know she congratulates you too.] “Is Mother doing alright?”

[She’s getting better. She might be able to be discharged as soon as next week.] “That’s good news.”

[When she gets discharged, bring the whole family over. Bring the in-laws too.] “Okay.”

The call ended simply. After hanging up, Jihun felt a bit heavy. Jeong-o, who quickly noticed the change in his expression, asked.

“Are you okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you want to be congratulated by your parents on your birthday?”

“I’m not a child.”

“Still, you’ll always be their baby.”

Jihun chuckled softly. It wasn’t that he had a desire to be congratulated.

As if sensing that thought, Jeong-o encouraged him.

“Go visit them. It’s been a while since you’ve seen your mother.”

“It’s been too long.”

“It’s not too late. Hurry and go visit her.”

Every time Jihun saw the relationship between Jeong-o and Guk-soon, a corner of his heart felt empty. Even so, he never showed it. Jeong-o wanted to tell her husband that he was also a precious son to his parents.

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Following Jeong-o’s advice, Jihun went to the hospital.

By chance, he ran into Jaekwang in the hallway. The unexpected visit from his son brightened Jaekwang's face.

"What brings you here?"

"Jeong-o told me to come."

"Your mother will be so happy to see you."

Jaekwang led Jihun to the hospital room.

As the door opened…

"Darling."

"What do you want to say, calling me so sweetly like that?"

Jaekwang's voice was softer than usual, and Yeong-mi responded sharply. Though her words were prickly, her tone was slow. Her voice struggled to project her feelings.

Jihun entered the room.

"I'm here."

Yeong-mi, who had been leaning against the bed with her eyes closed, opened her eyes and turned her head.

Her son had come to visit.

When she recognized the voice, her face contorted. Tears quickly pooled in her eyes.

In that moment, there was a silence where words could not come.

Hiccup. Sob…

After a while, a sob full of meaning escaped her.

Jihun quietly watched his mother’s small shoulders tremble.

No other words were necessary.

The tears flowing from her eyes expressed the regrets and laments in her heart.

“Please forgive me,” “I forgive you…” It was a time when no apologies or permissions were needed.

As time passed in the quiet room, Jihun sat in front of Yeong-mi.

With her eyes red from crying, Yeong-mi gazed at Jihun.

He cautiously opened his mouth.

“I see you in me, Mother.”

Possessiveness, jealousy, an obsessive stubbornness that some might consider excessive.

Even if he wanted to deny it, he couldn’t escape those traits.

He had resented his mother so much, but in reality, he was living just like her. With fierce possessiveness and jealousy, he held onto Jeong-o, confronted his mother with stubbornness, and fought with Cha Eun-yeob to protect his family.

If it hadn’t been for Jeong-o, his innate traits might have hurt someone.

Yeong-mi replied slowly.

“In the past, I would have felt pleased to hear that you take after me.”

“……”

“Now, I wish you wouldn’t.”

My son has become a better person than I am.

I hope he continues to be a better person. I hope he becomes someone different from me.

Having learned about life again, the mother truly wished for this.

“It was really hell not having you.”

Yeong-mi slowly began to share her feelings over the years.

“When you said you would never see me again, it felt like my life was over. Only then did I realize your feelings.”

“……”

“I understood the pain of not being able to see your child.”

“I didn’t really keep in touch even normally.”

“Still, thinking I would never see you again was a world of difference.”

Yeong-mi’s voice quivered.

“I’m sorry.”

“……”

“I’m sorry for blocking your memories.”

Yeong-mi apologized for the past.

Even Jihun’s previously calm eyes began to ripple.

In fact, Jihun hadn’t expected to receive an apology from Yeong-mi. He thought it would be enough if Jeong-o received one.

“My poison has hurt you too much.”

It was love, but it was poison, and although it was poison, it was still love—poisonous love.

He received an apology for the constraints that had bound him. From his mother.

“Now, if I make a mistake, will you tell me?”

“……”

“Can you tell me? Because I don’t know very well.”

The strength in Yeong-mi’s voice trembled. The desperate apology that created emotional ripples was painful to accept.

“Will you give me a chance to start over?”

Before long, tears resembling Yeong-mi’s began to well up in Jihun’s eyes.

Like droplets of dew growing on leaves, swelling in the sunlight, and then bursting, they gathered and then flowed down.

The wall of ice was slowly melting.

The heart had always been there, lingering and waiting for the locked door to open.

In the quiet hospital room.

Jihun watched his mother fall asleep and eventually dozed off himself.

In his dream, a butterfly appeared. No, it felt like he had become a butterfly. His body felt light.

The butterfly flitted around a flower garden, soaring up to find a flower it had loved long ago.

The butterfly’s wings settled on a day from seven years ago.

The day he was preparing to propose. The day his heart fluttered at the thought of introducing Jeong-o to his mother.

“Don’t worry about me, just rest. I’ll come by soon. I have a friend I want to introduce you to.”

[What? Who?] “I’ll get in touch again.”

And the night before.

The night he learned that Jeong-o was pregnant, a night filled with excitement and nervousness.

“I’m sorry. You probably have so many things you want to do, but I’m holding you back.”

[I thought you would dislike it.] “How could I dislike it? I just feel sorry for you.”

The voice of the person he loved, and his own gentle voice, resembling that of his beloved, felt like a soft breeze. The butterfly took to the air once more.

And then, how they had loved.

“I felt intimidated because you’re prettier than me. Can’t you be a little less pretty?”

“What are you talking about? You’re so much prettier.”

Again, how they had met.

“Excuse me. You’re Korean, right?”

“……”

“I’m the person who bumped into you earlier. I was wondering if you were hurt badly.”

Seven years ago, on a street in Melbourne.

That day, when he had stumbled upon a beautiful girl who burst into tears while searching for a ten-dollar bill she had dropped on the ground, the butterfly guided Jihun back to that moment.

As naturally as the tidal flats, submerged in high tide, emerged as the tide receded.

Twenty-six-year-old Jeong Ji-hun greeted him.

Twenty-five, twenty-four-year-old young Jeong Ji-hun also welcomed him.

Hello. You’re back.

I’ve been waiting all this time.

Thank you for coming back in time.

Happy birthday.

Ch161 - Has Your Memory Returned?

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Seven years ago. Jihun’s birthday.

It was the first birthday since they started dating.

Jeong-o had invited Jihun to her house. When Jihun arrived in front of her house, Jeong-o ran out to greet him.

“Let’s go up quickly.”

At Jeong-o’s urging, Jihun felt a flutter in his heart. Expecting something on his birthday was a feeling he had only harbored as a child, but it felt as if he had suddenly returned to those younger days. Of course, he couldn’t be entirely childlike; he was a healthy, grown man.

As he watched his girlfriend’s lively steps up the stairs, he felt a bit guilty about his own dark heart.

Finally, Jeong-o opened the front door and offered her congratulations.

“Ta-da! Happy birthday, Oppa!”

Inside the doorway was a small dining table set for a meal. The table was filled with dishes. The food looked delicious just by looking at it.

Jihun’s eyes widened in surprise. Although he had cooked for Jeong-o many times, he had never actually eaten her cooking. Jeong-o, who always

joked that her mother wouldn’t let her cook because she caused trouble in the kitchen, couldn’t have suddenly become a culinary genius overnight.

“Did you make this?”

“Mom sent it.”

“Even the seaweed soup?”

“If you eat the seaweed soup I made, you might want to return your birthday.”

“Did you tell her it’s my birthday?”

“No. Mom will make whatever I say I want.”

“……So, your mom thought everything was for you?”

“Whatever you leave behind, I’ll eat it.”

Jeong-o answered innocently. Jihun felt dizzy. Here he was, receiving a meal lovingly prepared by his girlfriend’s mother, whom he had never met.

“If you eat well, Mom will be happy too.”

“But you said you didn’t tell her I would eat it.”

“Mom says she’ll be happy if I’m happy. If you eat well, I’ll feel good, so Mom will be happy too.”

Along with his embarrassment for not having met her mother, a feeling of envy began to blossom. Between Jeong-o and her mother, there was a deep love that Jihun could not hope to rival. Jeong-o always had the face of a daughter who was fully loved.

“Did your mom and dad congratulate you a lot?”

How did Jeong-o know he was thinking about his family atmosphere? She asked about her parents. Jihun couldn’t share the loving stories that Jeong-o

had. His family didn’t have that kind of tenderness.

“My mom called this morning. She congratulated me on my birthday.”

Jeong-o nodded at Jihun’s monotonous reply. There were no more questions. It seemed that Jeong-o was gradually realizing that Jihun was hesitant to talk about his family.

“Oppa, hurry up and eat. I plated it nicely. It’s on our best dishes.”

Jihun couldn’t help but smile at his cute girlfriend’s proud demeanor. The food was genuinely delicious.

In particular, the seaweed soup was the best he had ever tasted. It felt like the taste was filled with love directed toward her daughter, who was far away. Jihun felt truly grateful to Jeong-o’s mother, whom he had never met.

As they finished the abundant lunch, Jeong-o pulled something out from under the bed, beaming.

“And, Oppa, I prepared a gift too.”

There was another gift.

“Ta-da!”

Jeong-o held out a box. Jihun opened it with a pounding heart. As soon as he saw inside, he burst out laughing.

Two books. A gift that was so quintessentially Jeong-o.

“I couldn’t afford anything nice, so I’ll buy you something else next week when I get my part-time job salary. But this is a special book. It’s my favorite.”

“So you’re giving me something you’ve read?”

“No, I bought it new.”

“You should give me something you’ve read. This is just a replica of your favorite book.”

“No, I like the font that’s printed in there.”

Jihun playfully made a pouty face, teasing Jeong-o. Her expression fell, and she slumped her shoulders, getting up from her seat.

“Alright. I’ll exchange it.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Why?”

“You wrote something here.”

On the first page of the book was Jeong-o’s handwriting. Jihun found himself more touched by the few lines she had written than by the book itself.

“Thank you. You don’t have to buy me anything else.”

A smile of satisfaction returned to Jeong-o’s face, which had almost turned to a frown for a moment. Her expression was so lovable that Jihun’s hand instinctively moved. His large hand, which cradled her cheek, gently tickled her chin, and Jeong-o’s eyes widened with tension.

“……Huh? Why?”

“A reward for the gift.”

“…….”

“Since you gave me your favorite, I have to reciprocate.”

“No, Jeong Jihun. Why are you being so forward?”

Jeong-o’s light reproach was quickly buried by Jihun’s lips.

In broad daylight. As if he had intentionally received a gift just to return the favor.

For Jihun, birthdays were a perfect day to openly reveal one's feelings. Since he had a girlfriend, he found himself feeling that way anywhere and anytime, just by having her beside him.

But no matter how much he desired it, he wouldn't do anything if she didn't want it.

"But Jeong-o."

Jihun, pulling his heated lips away for a moment, wriggled his hand that had gone inside his t-shirt and called out to Jeong-o.

"Did you buy new underwear?"

"……How do you know that?"

"I can tell just by touching it."

At Jihun's reply, Jeong-o's exposed skin turned completely flushed. Jihun quickly noticed that change.

"Thank you."

"What are you thanking me for?"

Jeong-o's flustered voice was once again swallowed by Jihun. Her short breaths intertwined with his, creating an intimate moment.

It was the happiest birthday for Jihun.

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At 4 a.m., Jihun woke up.

His mother was still deep in sleep, so Jihun quietly left the hospital room.

The world was still dark. But Jihun's mind felt clear and refreshing, as if an old fog had lifted. His heart raced, making it impossible for him to grab the steering wheel right away.

Jihun took some time to calm himself down before driving. He was headed to Jaegwang and Yeongmi's house, his family home.

The caretaker was surprised by his sudden visit. Jihun moved carefully, trying not to wake the others in the house.

He found himself in a storage room where he kept his old belongings. He remembered rummaging through this place seven years ago looking for an old cellphone. At that time, he had mindlessly passed by two books.

"I found it."

Finding the books he had passed by was not difficult. With an excited heart, Jihun opened the cover.

"Oppa, happy birthday!

I wish I could give you stars and the moon, but I'm sorry it's only these two books.

Instead, you might find stars and the moon inside the books.

When I earn a lot of money later, I'll buy you more books.

Happy, happy birthday!"

Jihun's eyes filled with tears as he read Jeong-o's simple handwriting.

Lee Jeong-o had kept her promise to earn a lot of money and buy more books.

So incredibly lovable.

Fearing that the process of him recalling memories might be painful, she didn't say anything at all. While she continually dropped hints, she never

brought up their past on purpose. She didn’t want to provoke him.

His memories didn’t return with a flash or a sudden burst. It didn’t arrive unexpectedly one day.

It was thanks to Jeong-o’s patience, who firmly believed that his memories would return someday and watched over him with the same love as seven years ago. Because of the emotional stability she continuously gifted him, and the comfort she provided.

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Early dawn.

Jihun returned home and cautiously opened the sliding door. The moment he took off his shoes and stepped inside, the sensor lights turned on. He heard footsteps approaching.

Jeong-o ran out.

“Were you awake?”

“No, I fell asleep in the living room.”

Jeong-o replied nonchalantly. She had been waiting for Jihun on the living room sofa, unable to rest comfortably in bed, and had dozed off. Jihun felt a bit upset. He had called the night before to say he would be late.

“I told you I’d be late.”

“I slept well. It’s fine. But why were you late? Did something happen?”

Jeong-o lightly brushed off Jihun’s rebuke and quickly asked.

“Did you talk to your mom?”

What had happened? Had the conflict eased? Why was he late? Since Jihun hadn’t brought up his mother, Jeong-o was worrying unnecessarily.

Seeing the innocent look in Jeong-o’s eyes, Jihun felt a wave of guilt.

He tilted his shoulders and pulled Jeong-o into a tight embrace. His emotions surged, and his breath grew hot.

His head and heart, now filled with memories from seven years ago, hesitated on what words to say first.

Just like Jeong-o seven years ago, who had burst into tears upon hearing Korean in a land filled with English, he felt tears threatening to spill.

He cautiously shared the news she was curious about.

“Mom said she was sorry.”

“And you accepted it?”

“Yeah.”

“Good job. Good job.”

“I was the one who ended up apologizing first.”

“That’s a good thing.”

Trying to hide the tremor in his voice, Jihun shared the story, and Jeong-o felt proud and happy as if it were her own accomplishment.

“I’m glad. Really glad. You must be tired. Get some more rest.”

“Okay. Let’s sleep together.”

Jihun thought he should let Jeong-o sleep first and went to the bathroom.

As Jeong-o gazed at Jihun’s retreating figure, she picked up the coat he had left behind. But for some reason, the pockets felt bulging. Tilting her head in curiosity, she reached into one of the pockets.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

Inside the pocket was a tangerine. There was also a tangerine in the other pocket.

Nostalgia washed over Jeong-o, and she couldn’t help but smile.

Seven years ago, she used to secretly slip chocolates or candies into Jihun’s coat pockets. On the last day they met, she had put a tangerine in there.

‘Could he be starting to remember? Or is this just a coincidence?’

Jihun had recalled some memories from November 2 and 3, seven years ago, through hypnosis therapy. However, he hadn’t remembered that she had put tangerines in his pockets. Jeong-o felt no regret. Just the fact that he remembered that much made her feel proud and fulfilled.

She didn’t have big desires. It would be nice if his memories returned, but even if they didn’t come back completely, she wouldn’t mind.

‘Ah, but it’s still exciting. For some reason, I’m excited.’

Yet, despite her firm resolve, her heart raced at the discovery of the tangerines in his pocket. Jeong-o shook her head.

In the midst of that, she noticed an envelope where his coat had been placed. It was a thick envelope. From its thickness and the creases, she could guess that there must be a book inside. Jeong-o picked up the envelope, peeked inside, and then set it back down.

‘Huh?’

But a moment later, she picked up the envelope again.

She caught a glimpse of the cover of a book she recognized from within the envelope.

Could it be?

Her heart raced like the heartbeat of the little heart monitor she had heard at the hospital. She reached inside the envelope to check the book.

It was Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. And…

It was the very book she had given Jihun on his birthday seven years ago.

Jeong-o flipped through the pages with trembling fingertips. The writing she had penned on the first page was still there.

Ah.

Tears welled up at the sight of her beloved handwriting.

Had his mother given it to him? Or had he found it himself?

At that moment, she heard a voice from behind.

"The reason I didn't let you drink was that you were beautiful."

The movements of her fingers tracing the letters on the first page halted. Jihun had returned and wrapped his arms around Jeong-o's shoulders from behind. She could feel his warm breath on her neck. Her face flushed as well.

"Because you were beautiful, I was worried someone would steal you when I wasn't around, and when I was around, I might act impulsively."

Jeong-o slowly turned her body to face Jihun.

She couldn't hide the tremble in her voice. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

"……Have you remembered?"

Instead of answering, he stretched his lips into a broad smile.

"Yay!"

Forgot that it was still early morning, Jeong-o shouted and threw her arms around Jihun's neck.

Ch162 - Late Meeting with the In-Laws

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A few months ago, before the hypnosis therapy, Jihun had asked Jeong-o if there was anything she was curious about regarding the Jihun from seven years ago.

At that time, Jeong-o immediately mentioned a few things: why he never introduced her to a friend, and why he disliked her drinking. She was curious about those things.

Remembering that conversation, Jihun decided to tell her the truth.

As it was Jihun's first experience with romance, he had been so captivated by Jeong-o's beauty that he didn't know what to do. He felt she was such a precious person that he hesitated even to hold her hand in the early stages of their relationship. He was well aware of the extent of his own desires.

He knew that if he held her hand, he would want to hug her, and if he hugged her, he would want to kiss her. And he was aware that he would crave even more than that.

That's why he had stopped her from drinking. It was triggered by an event in Melbourne.

During his last meeting with Jeong-o in Melbourne, they ended up drinking together. It was her first time trying that type of alcohol, and she quickly got drunk, which Jihun found incredibly cute. It was the first time he felt such fear. He became anxious that he might make a mistake with her.

So, he couldn’t get any closer in Melbourne, and it was regrettable to part ways. As they said goodbye, he left his contact information and emphasized several times that she should reach out when she returned home.

After that, all he experienced was waiting and regret. Why hadn’t she contacted him? Why hadn’t he made clearer plans with her? He couldn’t even put his phone down at night when it didn’t ring.

By the time she was due to return to Korea, he had become an even more sensitive person. The thought of her contacting him was enough to make him feel as if his nerves would melt away like snow.

After a long wait, he reunited with Jeong-o in Seoul. At that moment, Jihun made a firm resolution in his heart: he wouldn’t let her go this time.

Fortunately, Jeong-o noticed his sincerity and accepted him as her boyfriend.

He had forbidden her from drinking only after that. She was so beautiful that he feared making a mistake and worried that other guys with ulterior motives might approach her.

The reason he hadn’t introduced her to a friend was similar. He thought that any guy would end up liking Jeong-o, so he couldn’t carelessly introduce anyone. He hadn’t known Seung-kyu for long, and since he hadn’t met him frequently after his military discharge, he couldn’t introduce him.

Moreover, Jihun preferred spending time alone with Jeong-o rather than with someone else. He was so deeply infatuated with her that he couldn’t imagine parting ways.

The Jeong-o from seven years ago was truly adorable. Having grown up receiving plenty of love from her mother, Jeong-o always exuded love in her actions and words. She was well aware that she deserved to be loved. That bright energy was something Jihun envied and found endearing.

Of course, she is still heartbreakingly lovely today.

Jeong-o shouted with joy, “Kyaaa!” and threw her arms around Jihun’s neck, forgetting that it was still early in the morning.

“Do you remember how you confessed to me? What exactly did you say?”

“…Don’t talk about that.”

Seeing him shy made it real. He really remembers everything!

“Waaaaah!”

“But Jeong-o, it’s the crack of dawn…”

“What does it matter? Did you win the lottery or something?”

Eventually, Jeong-o’s commotion woke Guk-soon. She came out of her room, looking at the two with a puzzled expression.

“That’s not it, Mother.”

Jihun tried to pull Jeong-o’s arms away, but she wouldn’t let go.

“Mom! Oppa’s memories have returned!”

Jeong-o shouted in an excited voice. Guk-soon’s half-open eyes widened in surprise.

Yena also came out of her room, rubbing her eyes.

“Mom…”

Yena, who usually wakes up early, realized it wasn’t quite time yet. Still feeling sleepy, she groaned as she got out of bed. In response, Jeong-o shouted excitedly at her.

“Yena! Daddy’s memories have come back!”

“Really?”

Yena couldn’t fully understand the depth of the pain that came from losing one’s memories, so she couldn’t gauge the significance of Jihun’s regained memories either. However, seeing her mother’s joyful expression instantly changed Yena’s demeanor.

“Wow! Daddy’s memories came back!”

If mom is happy, then I’m happy too!

Yena was as joyful as if she had just found her favorite toy that she had been searching for days. Following her mother’s lead, she shouted, “Hooray! They’re back!”

Grabbing her mother’s hands, Yena spun around, and then she raised her arms high and hugged Jihun.

“Daddy! Hooray!”

Jihun lifted Yena high into the air in return.

In the midst of such joy, he felt tears welling up. Finding what he had lost made the presence of his child even more precious. Guk-soon, watching him from a distance with pride, also felt significant. After such a long journey, being part of this family felt miraculous.

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Time passed, and now in Jihun’s office.

“Do it again. Keep going.”

Jeong-o urged Jihun to continue talking about whatever he remembered from seven years ago.

“It’s really amazing. How can something just suddenly pop into your head like that?”

“I fell asleep and woke up, and it was as if my mind had cleared up like a lie.”

Jihun was astonished by how clean his memories felt, like a well-polished window. It felt as if his memories were contained in a time capsule, untouched and whole.

“But it probably wasn’t something that just came to you suddenly. It must be the result of the persistent observation of Lee Jeong-o all this time.”

He couldn’t help but attribute all of this to Jeong-o. Everything was thanks to the miracle she had brought into his life.

Jeong-o smiled brightly at her husband’s sweet words. However, as Jihun leaned closer, tilting his head as if he were about to say something affectionate, she froze for a moment.

I’m here to hear stories, not to engage in romantic gestures…

Jeong-o knew exactly what she had followed him into his office for, but she couldn’t push away her husband’s affection. Remembering her youthful innocence and the purity of her feelings from seven years ago, her excitement overwhelmed any other thoughts.

Just like the clean memories, her anticipation was untouched.

Jeong-o’s lips gently beckoned forward.

Knock, knock.

Suddenly, the door burst open.

“Hey! What’s going on?”

Seung-kyu rushed in, looking frantic as he pushed the door wide open.

Gasp!

Jeong-o suddenly pushed Jihun’s shoulder and stepped away from him.

But it was already too late; Seung-kyu had caught on to everything. He hesitated and asked, “Should I come back later?”

“Yeah,” Jihun replied, but…

“No! Come quickly!”

Jeong-o, her face flushed, immediately stood up from her seat.

“Then have a good time!”

“Why would I have a good time with her?”

Jihun retorted as Jeong-o hurriedly left the room. Ignoring his words, Jeong-o quickly made her escape. The focus shifted back to Seung-kyu.

Feeling the tension of interrupting a couple’s moment, Seung-kyu mumbled apologetically, “Sorry, but you called me here.”

It was then that Jihun remembered why Seung-kyu had come. He had sent him a text earlier that morning asking if he was coming to work and mentioned that he had something to say.

The mention of having something to say always piqued Seung-kyu’s interest, and he had rushed over as soon as he arrived at the office.

Jihun decided to share the truth with Seung-kyu.

“My memories have come back.”

The delivery was dry and straightforward, contrasting sharply with the sweetness he had experienced with Jeong-o.

That alone left Seung-kyu stunned.

“…What?”

“My memories from seven years ago have returned.”

“…The memories of leaving that house?”

“Yeah.”

“The memories of my military service, the memories of meeting you there, even the memories from Australia—those all came back?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you remember when I lent you the canteen cap in the military?”

“Yeah. I remember you bragging about it for a month. You had two because you inherited them from your dad’s military service number.”

“Damn you!”

Seung-kyu exclaimed and pulled Jihun into a tight hug. While he enjoyed being embraced by Jeong-o, being hugged by Seung-kyu made him feel a bit uncomfortable, causing him to scrunch his nose. Seung-kyu, overwhelmed with emotion, hugged Jihun tightly and let out a quiet sob.

“Are you crying?”

“…”

“You’re crying, aren’t you? Like a man.”

“What? Men don’t have feelings?”

Seung-kyu released Jihun and turned away, rubbing his eyes with his sleeve.

“Damn it, you jerk… Congratulations, you jerk…”

“…”

“Because of you… Huh? Because of you! …Do you have any idea how sad I was?”

“…”

“We were really close in the military. I cherished you so much! I was treated like a scammer by Chae Eun-yeob, and because of that, you were

wary of a great friend like me. Do you know how hurt I felt? Huh? Damn it…”

Hearing Seung-kyu’s complaints softened Jihun’s heart. He hadn’t expected such sentiment; it felt reassuring to know that he had a friend who had always cared for him.

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah! You should be sorry.”

With his nose red, Seung-kyu shouted back and then asked again, this time with a worried tone.

“Are you sure everything has come back? The memories of the military weren’t that great, so are you okay? Are you going to start dreaming about enlisting every night now?”

“I occasionally have those dreams anyway. Just with my imagination.”

“Damn…”

Something welled up in Seung-kyu again as he pulled Jihun into another hug.

“Don’t forget me again, okay?”

Jihun thought of Jeong-o. On the day he learned that Yena was his daughter, Jeong-o had said something similar to him. Don’t forget me.

Because of his amnesia, the precious people around him had become desperate to be remembered. He felt a pang of guilt for that.

“I got it.”

“Does anyone else know? That your memories have come back?”

“No. Only my family knows. There’s no need to make a big deal out of it.”

“….”

“I’m only telling you.”

“Why?”

“You are my… precious friend.”

Jihun said this while hiding his fingers behind his back, feeling awkward as such words slipped out for the first time.

However, Seung-kyu seemed pleased and patted Jihun on the back.

“Look at you! Finally grown up!”

Seung-kyu’s overflowing affection left Jihun feeling dazed. Although he felt guilty for not being able to react in kind, he decided that it was all a good thing.

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A week passed.

Young-mi was discharged after over a month in the hospital. While she still needed to undergo a few more tests and might require a second round of chemotherapy if necessary, her current prognosis was relatively positive.

Though the thought of more treatment made her dizzy, the time spent in the hospital allowed Young-mi to realize the value of life, the importance of family, and the significance of a kind heart.

On the weekend, Jihun’s family planned to visit Young-mi and Jae-gwang’s house. With Guk-soon also coming, it was essentially a belated meeting of families.

Before their visit, Jihun sent a text to Jae-gwang as a precaution.

– Don’t say anything strange to Jeong-o. Don’t say anything strange to my mother-in-law either. And don’t say anything strange to Yena.

‘How much does he think we’re strange people?’

Jihun felt a bit disappointed that his son didn’t seem to understand his parents’ concerns about potentially embarrassing themselves in front of his in-laws.

After all, he had spent half his life leading a company, so it was likely he had unknowingly hurt employees in the process. Since Guk-soon wasn’t just another employee but rather like a heavenly in-law, he knew he needed to act more cautiously.

Eventually, the staff informed him that Jihun’s family had arrived at the mansion.

Jae-gwang went to Young-mi’s room.

“Dear, our in-laws are here. Let’s go.”

Young-mi, who had been sitting on the edge of the bed, silently stood up. When Jae-gwang offered to help her, she gently pushed him away.

As the front door opened, Jihun’s family entered the mansion.

The first to speak was Yena.

“Grandpa!”

“Our princess has come!”

When his granddaughter rushed over with open arms, Jae-gwang couldn’t have been happier. He picked her up joyfully.

“Grandpa, I want candy!”

Taking this opportunity, Yena shouted her request. Though she had been warned by her mother not to pester her grandpa, she didn’t remember it.

“Alright. Let’s go. Let’s go.”

Feeling the urge to grant his granddaughter anything she wanted, Jae-gwang responded in a cheerful and lively tone.

However, the atmosphere beside them was much more subdued.

“Mother, how have you been?”

Jeong-o stepped forward and bowed to Young-mi.

Young-mi’s frail body, weakened from her long battle with illness, trembled slightly. She looked precariously close to collapsing, prompting Jeong-o’s hand to instinctively reach out to her.

Just as Jeong-o was about to support Young-mi, her knees buckled, and she sank to the floor.

“I’m sorry.”

“…”

“I feel ashamed.”

Young-mi spoke in a trembling, tearful voice.

Ch163 - Court Date

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Before visiting Jihun’s family home, Jeong-o reflected on what would happen today.

Previously, Young-mi had unexpectedly apologized in the hospital, and Jihun had stepped in on Jeong-o’s behalf. Jihun had told Young-mi to apologize properly after recovering, so this time, she would give a sincere apology.

In truth, Jeong-o no longer held any resentment towards Young-mi. From the moment he met her again in the hospital, his heart gradually thawed. Because he hadn’t been able to fully accept her apology back then, he felt more apologetic now.

He thought about ensuring that Young-mi wouldn’t feel embarrassed this time, but her apology came too quickly. To Jeong-o’s surprise, it seemed that Young-mi’s self-reproach was much greater than any resentment he had.

Jeong-o poked Jihun in the leg. When Jihun glanced over, she nodded toward Yena.

Jihun, quick on the uptake, immediately understood what Jeong-o meant. No matter the circumstances, it wasn’t necessary for his granddaughter to witness her grandmother kneeling.

Jihun quickly dashed over, scooping Yena from Jae-gwang’s arms and heading toward Jae-gwang’s study.

Soon, only Jeong-o, Young-mi, Guk-soon, and Jae-gwang remained in the room.

Jeong-o also found her knees giving way beneath her.

“Mother, I’m okay. Please get up.”

This time, Jeong-o gave a discreet nod toward Jae-gwang, who was standing dazed after losing his granddaughter.

Realizing what his daughter-in-law wanted, Jae-gwang stepped closer. As Jeong-o held Young-mi’s arm to help her up, Jae-gwang also offered his support. Young-mi, though free from the hospital, still needed to be careful.

Young-mi couldn’t resist Jeong-o and Jae-gwang’s hands and cautiously rose to her feet. Even standing, she wore an embarrassed expression. Jeong-o had to comfort her.

“Mother, I’m really okay now. I hope you’re okay too. If you have any burdens, please let them go and be happy.”

Everyone has their own timing. It has always been this way.

A baby born after eight months, a baby that stays in the womb for the full ten months, a baby taking its first steps after ten months, a baby that only crawls even after turning one.

And kids who become adults before finishing high school, people who can’t become adults because they have jobs and give birth…

It’s usually the case, but there’s no right answer. A baby born after eight months might be the healthiest, a baby that only crawls after turning one could become an athlete, and a person who matures late might end up being respected by everyone.

Young-mi would be the same. If she had now become someone who understands the value of love, then this was just the beginning. There was no need for resentment about realizing that late. The path ahead was more

important than complaints about the past. Jeong-o's family was just starting out.

"Thank you for saving Yena, even while you were unwell in the hospital."

"No, that's not it…"

Tears welled up in Young-mi's eyes.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have accepted Yena's umbilical cord blood…"

"Grandpa!"

As Young-mi's voice trembled, Yena's voice echoed from the hallway again. She had come back after realizing that her grandfather wasn't following her.

"Grandpa, why aren't you coming?"

Seeing Yena approach brought a smile to Jeong-o's face. Even if she humbled herself before everyone in the world, she was endlessly proud when it came to her children. Today would surely become a memorable day for Yena as well.

"Mother, why don't you tell Yena about the umbilical cord blood yourself? She would be so proud."

Jeong-o changed her tone to suggest this to Young-mi. Only then did Young-mi wipe her tears and approach Yena.

"Sweetheart."

"…"

"Thank you. Thank you, our… granddaughter."

"Why?"

Yena asked with wide eyes. Jeong-o explained the reason.

“Our Yena shared her blood with her grandmother, so she’s thanking you.”

“Oh, I see!”

Now understanding the meaning, Yena excitedly explained, “Grandma, my blood has a map in it, so even if I get lost, I can always find my way back to you.”

A map in the blood.

Eventually, people they would meet.

In the end, Young-mi hugged Yena and started crying again.

Guk-soon, Jae-gwang, and Young-mi exchanged late greetings. Since it had been a seven-year delay in their meeting, both Jae-gwang and Young-mi felt very apologetic. After expressing their gratitude for Guk-soon’s application for the umbilical cord blood storage, they bowed their heads deeply once more. Jae-gwang politely addressed them.

“Thank you for coming. We should have arranged this gathering sooner, and I’m sorry it’s happening now. As you know, we are quite lacking in many ways. We will learn a lot from you, Father-in-law.”

“No, it’s I who should thank you for taking the precious time to invite us. Please take good care of our child.”

“It’s us who should ask Jihun to take good care of us. We might cause some trouble for you while living together…”

“Seobang Jeong is so kind in both speech and action that there’s nothing to criticize. He’s a son-in-law we’re very proud of.”

While the compliments flowed back and forth, Jae-gwang occasionally checked Jihun’s expression. He couldn’t help but feel cautious about what Jihun had texted him earlier. It made it harder to open up.

“Well, I… though it’s late, how about we hold the kids’ wedding soon?”

“It would be great to have the wedding quickly, but I’m not sure what to do since Jeong-o is having a second child. How about waiting until after the second one is born, Father-in-law?”

Guk-soon spoke on behalf of Jeong-o. It reminded her of when Jeong-o had whined about being pregnant and having to wear a wedding dress.

Listening quietly, Young-mi became solemn again. The delays in all the processes were her fault.

“I’m sorry that all the processes have been delayed because of me, Mother…”

“No, it’s not because of you, but because of the kids. The second one is coming soon.”

Guk-soon shook her head and gestured towards Jihun and Jeong-o.

As Jihun and Jeong-o subtly avoided eye contact, Guk-soon grinned. Jeong-o was amazed at how her mother confidently interacted with Jae-gwang and Young-mi without feeling intimidated. Yet, her mother was solely thinking about her daughter.

After having a meal together, wrapping up the discussions with the adults, exploring the mansion, and spending time making candy with Yena, the day gradually began to fade.

Initially, Young-mi had felt like a criminal, unable to say a word, but she gradually managed to smile, albeit awkwardly. Guk-soon often engaged her in conversation, and by the time they were about to part, Young-mi had opened up a bit.

“Yena, come visit again. Come often. Grandma will play with you a lot.”

Young-mi gently patted Yena’s head as she spoke.

“Then can Grandma also make candy?”

Yena asked, holding bags of candy in both hands. Her straightforward question indicated that there was no visit without purpose, leading to Young-mi's next task.

"Yes, Grandma will practice and make pretty candy for you."

"Okay, yes!"

Yena replied energetically, with conditions. As everyone laughed, Jihun approached Young-mi.

"Mother."

Jeong-o observed Jihun whispering to Young-mi with keen interest. Young-mi's expression turned serious, suggesting that it was something serious.

After parting from Jae-gwang and Young-mi, Jeong-o asked Jihun on their way home.

"What did you talk about with Mother before we left?"

"It was nothing much."

"Your expression looked serious, though."

"It was about the veil."

"Oh."

Bae Il, who confessed all the truths related to the incident involving Chae Eun-yeop and admitted his mistakes, was sentenced to one year in prison with a two-year suspended sentence in the first trial.

Jihun, the victim of the hit-and-run incident seven years ago, hoped for leniency, but it was difficult to reach an agreement with the family of Kim Jin-goo, who had served time in place of Bae Il. However, his contributions as a police officer were taken into consideration, allowing him to avoid serving time.

“How is Kwon Bae-il doing now?”

“He’s studying English.”

“Studying English?”

“He wants to open a Go academy in the U.S. someday. I told him I would invest in it.”

“Wow!”

“Is that all it takes to impress you?”

Jeong-o couldn’t bring himself to say that he admired Bae Il’s aspirations, even though he felt a bit emotional knowing the reasons behind Bae Il’s desire to go to America. He genuinely wanted to support Bae Il’s future.

Thinking about Bae Il’s unfortunate fate naturally led his thoughts to Chae Eun-yeop. Jeong-o glanced at the calendar and slowly said, “By the way, tomorrow is…”

Jihun nodded as if he already knew.

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The next day.

It was the final trial date for Chae Eun-yeop.

Jihun and Jeong-o attended the trial. On their way to the courthouse, a few reporters recognized Jihun and approached him, but he did not respond to their interview requests.

Since the trial was closed to the public, the courtroom was quite empty.

“Eun-bi is here, too. With her mother.”

Eun-bi was sitting far from the defendant’s seat. She wore dark sunglasses and a mask, but Jeong-o recognized her.

Soon, Chae Eun-yeop entered the courtroom in a prison uniform. She looked a bit thinner but was otherwise well. With a fairly relaxed expression, Eun-yeop scanned the audience, and her gaze sharpened when it met Jihun’s.

Just wait. I will soon be free and repay this humiliation.

Jeong-o felt a chill, as if he could hear Chae Eun-yeop’s voice. But when the judge entered, she immediately assumed a solemn expression. Jeong-o was taken aback.

“Look at her changing her expression. It’s astonishing.”

“I heard she wrote a reflection letter forty times.”

In response to Jeong-o’s whispered comment, Jihun replied. Forty times meant she had written a reflection letter almost every day. Jeong-o was even more astonished.

“Wait, who did she write the reflection letters to? The person she should apologize to is her brother, so who the heck received these letters?”

However, before they could hear an answer, the trial began.

While reflecting on her mistakes, Chae Eun-yeop maintained her claim of innocence throughout the trial. She intended to admit to only the crimes she couldn’t deny while trying to evade responsibility for the rest. However, the prosecution became more persistent.

“The prosecution has discovered cash hidden by the defendant. The amount matches the testimony of witness Ham Dae-geun, and the flow of funds is clear. This reveals yet another lie from the defendant.”

Every time the prosecution presented their evidence, the lawyer looked increasingly troubled as he glanced at Chae Eun-yeop.

Finally, all the evidence and testimonies converged in one place.

“Prosecution, please present your sentence.”

At the judge’s request, the prosecutor stood up.

“The defendant quickly eliminated anything that would obstruct her father’s success, paving the way for him. In the process, she hired a hitman to create a noisy incident involving Kim Jin-goo, instructing him to commit murder, and ahead of her father’s confirmation hearing, she solicited members of the National Assembly to defile the sacred National Assembly. However, when her father’s confirmation hearing failed, she harbored resentment over all of this and decided to kill Jeong Jihun, resulting in the traffic accident. After failing in that endeavor, she attacked Jeong Jihun’s daughter and mother, Jang Young-mi, injuring Young-mi.”

Chae Eun-yeop shook her head with tear-filled eyes, as if to say that all these statements were untrue. To someone who didn’t know the details of the case, her performance was convincing enough to make her appear wronged.

“Before every crime occurred, there was the defendant’s meticulous planning, and until the very last moment when the handcuffs were placed on her at the hospital, the defendant pretended to be in a daze, intending to claim innocence in this court. Thus, the defendant demonstrates a poor character, shows no remorse, and is still filled with a relentless desire for revenge, making her a serious threat to society. Therefore, this prosecutor seeks a life sentence to permanently isolate the defendant from society.”

Chae Eun-yeop’s eyes flashed, breaking her previously theatrical facade of innocence. That was likely her true expression.

Ch164 - The Go Tournament Again

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After the prosecutor sat down, the judge said, “Defense counsel, please present your final arguments.”

The momentary expression that had appeared on Eun-yeop’s face quickly vanished. As the defense attorney rose from his seat, Eun-yeop transformed her expression once again into one of innocence and helplessness. Jeong-o felt a chill run down her spine at the sudden change in demeanor.

“The defendant has grown up under the guidance of a father who has dedicated his life to upholding the law as a Supreme Court justice and a mother who is a professor at a law school. She became a lawyer who understands the sanctity of the law better than anyone. After becoming a lawyer, she has worked several times as a public defender, standing up for the innocent and powerless. This human rights lawyer has been embroiled in cases where the evidence was meticulously fabricated, leading to her unfounded accusations.”

Jeong-o turned her head to look at Eun-bi. Eun-bi had removed her sunglasses, but her eyes revealed no emotions.

“As I have stated repeatedly, the defendant has no connection to the Cheolwangpa organization, and I cannot comprehend why Kim Jin-goo’s cell phone was found in her home. She merely met Kwon Bae-il out of sorrow over her father’s death and exchanged a few harsh words. However, she acknowledges her wrongdoing in making such reckless comments and is willing to accept her punishment. As for the unfortunate incident with Kwon Bae-il, she simply feels regret. The defendant was just looking for her friend, Jeong Ji-heon, when she unexpectedly faced harm. Moreover,

please consider that the defendant was in a mentally unstable state when she entered the hospital room of Jeong Ji-heon's mother, Jang Young-mi."

After the lawyer finished speaking, Chae Eun-yeop stood up.

"If I could turn back time, there are many things I would want to change. Of course, it would be best to go back to when my father was alive, but even if that is not possible, I wish to go back to a time before anyone was harmed because of me, no matter how big or small. Since I cannot turn back time, all I can do now is offer my heartfelt apologies. It was never intentional, but I still hope that those who were hurt because of me recover quickly. I am truly sorry."

Jeong-o trembled with anger at Eun-yeop's insincerity, clenching her fists tightly. Ji-heon held her hand firmly.

"Ah, I shouldn't get worked up thinking about our little one."

Jeong-o reminded herself to calm her heart by recalling the baby inside her.

With Eun-yeop's final remarks, the trial came to an end. As Jeong-o left the courthouse with Ji-heon, Eun-bi ran up to her. Ji-heon took a few steps to the side, sensing that Eun-bi had something to say to Jeong-o.

While Jeong-o could recognize another mother-to-be, Eun-bi's thin figure made it hard for others to suspect her pregnancy. Nevertheless, Eun-bi habitually wrapped her arms protectively around her belly.

"We're not here to help your brother's defense."

Eun-bi, now without her sunglasses, spoke to Jeong-o. She seemed concerned that others might see her as being as shameless as Chae Eun-yeop.

"Mom has decided to live for herself now. My brother has become an obstacle in my life… and he is no longer needed since he hasn't realized his mistakes."

Eun-bi’s flat tone suggested that she did not seek any sympathy from Jeong-o.

“You probably don’t understand my feelings because you have a good family.”

However, seeing the despondent look in Eun-bi’s eyes, which appeared so dull yet sad, Jeong-o felt an urge to say something but remained silent.

“Anyway, I think my mom just wants my brother not to receive a death sentence. I feel the same way.”

“……”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to see my brother sentenced. I’m planning to leave for the U.S. soon. Everything is already prepared. Mom wanted to see his face just once before leaving, so that’s why I came.”

“……”

“I’m sorry.”

After a stream of information that was hardly intriguing, a sudden apology followed. It felt like a concealed admission wrapped in layers of words. The tone was flat, but one emotion shone through clearly:

Shame.

“Well, I’ll be going.”

Seeming unable to endure her own embarrassment, Eun-bi turned on her heels and left without another word.

After Eun-bi left, Ji-heon returned to Jeong-o’s side. The event had unfolded so quickly that Jeong-o only snapped back to reality after taking a few more steps. With her eyes still blank, she subtly lifted the corners of her lips.

“Oppa.”

“Yeah.”

“I think hearing an apology is a hundred times better than not hearing one.”

“……”

“There was no clear reason for the apology, like ‘I’m sorry for this’ or ‘I’m sorry for that,’ but just that single word ‘sorry’ makes me feel so relieved.”

With Jeong-o’s sentiment, Ji-heon let out a quiet sigh.

“So, are you satisfied?”

“Yeah. Extremely.”

Eun-bi, my Jeong-o is such an easygoing person.

You, with your half-hearted apology, have been brushed aside so gracefully by her.

Ji-heon hoped that, even after a long time, Chae Eun-yeop would come to realize that while she may have no luck with brothers, she had considerable luck in other aspects.

***

On the Same Day.

Young-mi sat in a café, waiting for Bae-il.

She had heard about Bae-il from Ji-heon—everything that had happened until now and how Bae-il was doing. Young-mi expressed her intention to visit him.

This morning, she called the phone number Ji-heon had given her, and Bae-il answered. Young-mi told him she would wait for him at a café near her house. She didn’t want to force him to come; she simply said that if he didn’t show up before the café closed, she would leave.

Bae-il arrived not long after.

“Hello. It’s nice to meet you for the first time.”

Bae-il greeted her somewhat stiffly. That was the best he could manage.

He had lived for decades resenting someone he had never met. He had grown to hate Young-mi, even resent his friend Ji-heon.

After his mother passed away, he had gone through such a bleak childhood that not a single happy memory came to mind. As he grew taller, so did his hatred. He needed someone to blame, so he directed his anger toward Jang Young-mi and Jeong Ji-heon without restraint.

It likely wasn’t just one reason; it was the outcome of many choices. Yet he believed Ji-heon and Young-mi were the sole reasons for his suffering and let his hatred run wild.

He lived a life akin to a novice’s Go board.

When cornered, he had lost hope first. All the stones were laid out according to the will of the player holding them. Every stone had its own role and created a web of cause and effect, but he only blamed the opponent who had cornered him.

Even the stones that were useful became traps and blunders in his eyes. He hadn’t even tried to revive the game or think back on it.

It was only now that he understood.

“I’m sorry for coming here now.”

Young-mi spoke politely.

She apologized sincerely for the pain she had caused, for the difficulties she had inflicted, and for forgetting them all these years. She repeated this apology several times.

Bae-il couldn’t find any words to respond. He felt embarrassed to accept an apology since he too had many faults.

“If you need my help with anything, just let me know—be it labor or money.”

“I’m fine.”

That was all Bae-il could muster as a reply. He couldn’t say anything warmer.

“Then can I leave now?”

Bae-il stood up from his seat.

As he turned to leave, he managed a faint, fragile smile.

Surely, Mrs. Jang Young-mi must have come to apologize at her son’s request. I envied that heart, that love. It was a feeling I could never have again. I had no mother like that.

So, Ji-heon, I’ll be a little petty.

Forgiveness takes time. Now that I’ve received an apology, it was time for Bae-il to face things on his own.

I hope you can understand this time too.

***

The leaves that had colored the trees above had now fallen to the ground, marking the change of seasons.

And it was the day of Chae Eun-yeop’s sentencing.

Something even more significant happened for Ji-heon’s family: Ye-na was going to participate in the Go tournament again.

This time, both Jeong-o and Ji-heon had decided to accompany Ye-na. However, the day before the tournament, Jeong-o persuaded Ji-heon to attend the sentencing hearing instead. Ultimately, Ji-heon would attend the trial as the family representative.

“Ye-na, I’m sad that I can’t go.”

On the way to the tournament venue, Jeong-o spoke as if there were unavoidable circumstances preventing Ji-heon from attending, despite being the one who wasn’t going.

“Yeah.”

“Dad will go.”

Ji-heon, slightly annoyed, stubbornly stated that he was determined to watch the sentencing before joining them.

“Ye-na, tell Dad you’ll do great at the tournament!”

“Dad, I’ll get first place! You should hurry and go to work!”

“But I’m going, you know?”

Jeong-o and Ye-na looked so close that Ji-heon felt a pang of jealousy. After dropping them off at the tournament venue, he headed toward the courthouse, feeling anxious even before the trial began.

What did that brat Chae Eun-yeop do to deserve so many crimes?

If it could just be over in five minutes, that would be great, but the lawyers familiar with the case all agreed that it would take at least an hour for the judge to read the verdict. If it hadn’t been for his wife’s order to share the experience afterward, he wouldn’t have taken this road.

“Ji-heon.”

But unexpectedly, he found a companion on this lonely path. Bae-il had appeared.

“Bae-il.”

Bae-il, whom he hadn’t seen in a while, seemed to be in quite good spirits. It looked like he had finally put down the burden he had carried for years and felt much more at ease.

“Did you come alone?”

“Yeah. Jeong-o went to the Go tournament with Ye-na.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I want to hurry up and see my daughter too.”

“I’ll keep an eye on things for you. You should go quickly.”

“No, I need to see Chae Eun-yeop get sentenced with my own eyes.”

Bae-il chuckled at Ji-heon’s serious response. After hesitating, he finally shared something that had happened a few days earlier.

“I met your mother the other day.”

“Oh, really?”

Ji-heon feigned ignorance, pretending he hadn’t heard anything from Young-mi, and responded nonchalantly. Bae-il smiled slightly but didn’t pry into whether Ji-heon had asked his mother for anything. Ji-heon felt relieved.

Soon, Chae Eun-yeop and the judge entered the courtroom.

“From now on, we will proceed with the sentencing of defendant Chae Eun-yeop.”

The judge announced. Ji-heon checked the time.

There must be no light punishment. A proper verdict must be delivered. But he hoped it wouldn’t take an hour for the verdict. He wished the judge

would read the sentencing quickly like a machine gun so that it could end sooner.

***

Back at the Olympic Handball Arena.

Upon arriving at the familiar venue, Ye-na shrank back slightly. Her memories of this place were not particularly pleasant, so Jeong-o hugged her tightly.

The woman who had lured Ye-na outside the Go academy long ago, Pyo Ji-ae, turned out to be Bae-il's acquaintance.

It was a woman who had feelings for Bae-il who helped him. Even now, thinking back to that incident still sent chills down her spine and stirred up feelings of resentment, but Jeong-o's family had decided to bury it all.

'Before I knew it, I've become an icon of forgiveness…'

Reflecting on the past, Jeong-o chuckled to herself.

While she was lost in thought, Ye-na spoke.

"Mom, now I'm going in."

"Okay! Do well! I'll be watching from here."

"Okay!"

The child waved cheerfully and left.

Korea's Go prodigies gathered in one place.

This tournament followed a similar knockout format as previous ones, divided into lower and upper grades. Seven-year-old Ye-na was placed in the lower grade division.

"Jeong Ye-na."

“Yes.”

Ye-na responded when the supervisor called her name. The supervisor verified her name tag and her face.

Group B, Jeong Ye-na. Just a few months ago, her name had felt so awkward at the Go tournament, but now it was a name familiar to her ears and eyes. As the name became familiar, the situation felt more comfortable. Although she had joked with her dad, she truly felt like she might be able to get first place.

Just then, someone at the next table spoke up.

“Are you back for the tournament again?”

At the sound of the voice, Ye-na turned her head.

It was Hong Jae-in, Hong Su-in’s older brother. Jae-in scanned Ye-na up and down with a dismissive smirk.

“Are you here to embarrass yourself again?”

Ch165 - A Kindness Shown to the Worthless

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Ye-na’s expression, which had been determined with her lips tightly pressed, slightly stiffened.

She was about to ask, “What does embarrassment mean?” but decided to keep quiet. She had a fleeting sense that she understood. She had enough intuition for that.

“We’ll meet in the third round,” Ye-na said to Hong Jae-in.

Calculating the numbers and orders, she realized that if she won her first two games, she would face Jae-in in the third.

“Do you think you can make it to me?” Jae-in replied, raising one corner of his mouth in a smirk.

Jae-in had come to this tournament with the goal of winning. It was his last chance to compete as a lower-grade player. Once the new year rolled around, he would have to compete against sixth-graders in the upper grades.

If he didn’t achieve something impressive in his final tournament as a lower-grade player, the older kids might look down on him.

His new academy teacher had assured him he would place in the rankings. Although a child who had won a Go tournament in August was quite skilled, Jae-in had received special tutoring that allowed him to analyze that child’s games and find weaknesses. Now, he felt invincible.

The gold medal was his for the taking.

“Why can seven-year-olds even compete? They just cry and throw tantrums,” Jae-in chuckled at a joke with a friend in front of him.

Watching Jae-in laugh at something not particularly funny, Ye-na tilted her head in confusion.

Why would he mock her before truly understanding their skills?

However, she didn’t dwell on Jae-in’s attitude too much. She simply thought to herself that she should not become someone like him.

***

Seoul Western District Court.

In a solemn atmosphere, the judge began to methodically outline Chae Eun-yeop’s crimes. It was a typical procedure, but Eun-yeop appeared uncomfortable, showing signs of boredom several times. He seemed eager for the verdict to come so he could throw off his burdens.

After about twenty minutes, Eun-yeop appeared to yawn, his nostrils flaring slightly.

“The defendant submitted over sixty letters of remorse but approached the trial with implausible excuses, attempting to conceal and minimize his crimes. After the prosecution’s demands, he even tried to bribe the judicial researchers and judges out of anxiety about his sentencing, thereby undermining the value of the judiciary,” the judge revealed a new fact.

Eun-yeop frowned, and the audience began to stir.

“He even tried to bribe the judge!” Ji-heon murmured quietly, prompting Bae-il beside him to let out a soft, incredulous sigh.

In a way, he was truly a remarkable person. It was rare for someone to struggle so hard for their dignity and freedom. Few people in the world would believe someone could be as cunning and wicked as he was.

Starting from the bribery of the judge, the verdict became increasingly intriguing.

“Every time evidence and testimonies were added, the defendant changed his statements. He continually claimed mental instability as an excuse, showing no sincere remorse, which indicates that the defendant still does not comprehend the seriousness of his crimes. Therefore, the court cannot avoid holding the defendant accountable for all these charges.”

Amidst this, Ji-heon anxiously checked the time. His desire to quickly run to Ye-na and Jeong-o clashed with his sense of duty to witness Chae Eun-yeop’s final moments, deepening his worry.

There were already so many crimes committed; adding another one meant the verdict would surely be long.

“All evidence and testimonies were consistent and verifiable facts, and no logic could support the defendant’s claims of slander. Thus, the court finds the defendant guilty of conspiracy to murder Kim Jin-gu, attempted murder of Jeong Ji-heon, attempted murder of Jang Young-mi, along with bribery, receiving bribes, and obstruction of justice.”

Yet, the end was finally in sight.

“Therefore, I hereby sentence the defendant, Chae Eun-yeop, to life imprisonment, as requested by the prosecution.”

At the judge’s pronouncement, Ji-heon felt a rush of relief and nearly burst into applause.

Eun-yeop’s eyes widened as if they would pop out, and he jumped to his feet in shock.

“W-What the…! Your Honor!”

If the police hadn’t restrained Chae Eun-yeop beside him, he might have lunged at the departing judge.

Even after being bound by the police, he continued to thrash about violently. It seemed he could not accept the outcome. He had judged that since it was rare for the court to follow the prosecution’s demands, he would likely receive a sentence of only a few years, and with good behavior, he could be eligible for parole.

“Why! Why! I can’t accept this!”

What will you do if you can’t accept it? The verdict has already been given.

“Let go! Hey! Jeong Ji-heon! You bastard! This is all your doing!”

When Eun-yeop’s eyes met Ji-heon’s, he screamed at him for no reason.

Ji-heon looked at Eun-yeop with hazy eyes.

I’m sorry, but I don’t have enough passion to invest in your verdict. Your place in my life is utterly insignificant.

Ji-heon watched for a moment as Eun-yeop was dragged out, struggling helplessly, and then he immediately exited the courtroom.

It’s finally over!

There was no time to spare. He needed to go to Ye-na quickly.

***

Ye-na had effortlessly won her first two matches and was now set for the third.

Her opponent in the third match was Hong Jae-in. Jae-in had also breezed through his first two games to reach the third.

“Oh, you made it this far?”

“Yeah!”

Jae-in’s tone was sarcastic, but Ye-na responded cheerfully.

“Right. That’s nice, isn’t it?”

Jae-in’s mocking tone was evident, but it seemed Ye-na didn’t catch on.

‘The third match should be easy!’

Jae-in silently cheered to himself. Having no obstacles in his way to victory was a good thing. He didn’t want to tire himself out early. He planned to toy with the child in front of him, thinking of the champion from the August Go tournament.

However, shortly after the match began, Jae-in froze. Something was different from their last encounter.

‘Wasn’t I really bad back in August?’

Jae-in was taken aback by Ye-na’s strong opening and ended up placing a stone in an unexpected spot.

“…That was a mistake.”

“Yeah.”

Ye-na nodded as if she understood.

After that, for some reason, the momentum continued to shift in Ye-na’s favor. Every time Jae-in made a move, Ye-na responded immediately with her own stone, as if she were playing without thinking.

But she wasn’t playing thoughtlessly. Every move was strategically placed.

For some reason, Jae-in felt lost. Keeping up with Ye-na was starting to take his breath away. He felt the pressure mounting. Sweat beads formed on his forehead.

He couldn’t lose like this. Jae-in needed to pull out the special technique he had planned for the finals.

In a whisper, he leaned closer to Ye-na.

“Why did you become Jeong Ye-na?”

Targeting weaknesses to apply psychological pressure was the best tactic when dealing with children.

“Did your dad just come back, or did he change?”

The humiliation of July. After being forced to leave his academy because of this kid, when Jae-in’s mother had looked for another academy, she had said this.

“Looking at your dad’s good looks, he’s definitely not an ordinary person. He probably met your mom while working in a bar.”

Recalling his mother’s words, Jae-in smirked triumphantly.

“Does your dad work in a bar?”

“No, my dad is a director at an advertising company!”

“Advertising company? A bar advertising company?”

“It’s Seoyeon Group, Max Planning!”

Seoyeon Group? While he wasn’t familiar with the name of the advertising company, he certainly recognized Seoyeon Group. He couldn’t not know it; most of the snacks Jae-in ate were from the snack brands of Seoyeon Foods.

“But if you keep talking, you’ll run out of time. Su-in lost to me while talking about something other than Go.”

As Jae-in’s gaze wandered, Ye-na pointed it out. Meanwhile, time continued to tick away.

In this Go tournament, each player was given a limit of 10 minutes per match. They had to think about where to place their next stone within those 10 minutes, and if they exhausted that time, they had to place a stone within 30 seconds.

This was called a “time countdown.” If a player failed to place a stone after three 30-second countdowns, they would lose the game.

Jae-in was so caught up in random thoughts that he failed to consider where to place his stone when his turn finally came. Before he knew it, only 2 minutes of his time remained. In a panic, he placed a stone on the board.

Gasp.

But the hastily placed stone created yet another blunder.

“Th-That was a mistake!”

“Yeah.”

As Jae-in shouted in frustration, Ye-na nodded.

“It’s okay to make mistakes. It’s fine.”

“……”

“You can turn this mistake into something beautiful.”

“……”

“You just need to reflect and do better next time.”

Is this kid on her second life or something? Why does she sound so much like an old person?

Jae-in could not appreciate Ye-na’s advice or her understanding, and he yelled again.

“What do you know?!”

“Hey, you shouldn’t fight.”

The supervisor, who was standing nearby, intervened.

“He keeps acting all high and mighty!”

Jae-in protested in indignation.

“Teacher, I didn’t do that!”

Ye-na countered firmly.

In the end, the supervisor sat beside them to keep an eye on the situation. This put Jae-in at a disadvantage. With the supervisor watching, he couldn’t provoke Ye-na by targeting her weaknesses or play tricks.

Ye-na continued to apply calm and strong pressure on Jae-in at a pace that was neither too fast nor too slow, just like before. Jae-in felt himself growing more and more out of breath. His head started to throb.

Eventually, he failed to decide where to place his next stone and used up his entire 10-minute time limit.

Now it was time for the first 30-second countdown.

Tears welled up in his eyes.

He placed a stone anywhere on the board.

Ye-na tilted her head as if she couldn’t understand why Jae-in had chosen that spot and continued the match at her own pace.

And then it was Jae-in’s turn again. He swallowed his tears. This time, it felt like his head was going numb.

He wished the entire venue would catch fire and the tournament would be canceled.

As he hesitated, the second 30-second countdown began, and before he knew it, he had reached the final countdown. He wanted to smash the timer.

He had practiced hard for today. He had to win today!

He needed to be recognized by people!

But in the end, Jae-in failed to make his next move.

“Teacher, this guy is crying!”

Frustrated and aggrieved, Jae-in let his tears fall like drops of chicken droppings.

“Hong Jae-in, you lose by time.”

The supervisor handed Jae-in a tissue with a cold expression, as if he had seen this type of child many times before.

“Don’t cry. I just won today, and you just lost today. Just study more and do well next time.”

Ye-na comforted him quite maturely. It was a kindness bestowed upon someone insignificant.

Jae-in couldn’t say a word.

“Jeong Ye-na, you need to go over there.”

In the meantime, the supervisor wrapped up Ye-na and Jae-in’s match and pointed her towards her next match. As Ye-na walked in the direction indicated by the supervisor, she waved her hand.

“It was fun. See you next time!”

No, they probably wouldn’t meet again.

Today was a limit and a barrier for Hong Jae-in, and for Jeong Ye-na, it was just the beginning. Ye-na had only just finished her third match.

In Ye-na’s life, Hong Jae-in held no significance whatsoever.

“Goodbye!”

Ye-na’s bright voice echoed around the venue before softly settling down.

Ch166 - It’s my daughter! She’s my daughter!

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Outside the spectator area of the arena.
Jae-in could only whimper.

He had expected his son to win, but the unexpected defeat hit him hard.

Jae-in, who had been the best player in the lower grades at the new Go academy, faced a shocking loss in the third match, and his mother was equally taken aback. However, more than the shock, there was a feeling of embarrassment.

She had boasted to the other parents at the academy. She had wanted to show off her son and put the mothers who occasionally sneered at her pride in their sons in their place.

She had never felt such humiliation.

“Let’s go.”

Jae-in’s mother pulled on his arm as he cried, but Jae-in felt as if his feet were glued to the ground, unable to move.

“Let’s go already! What’s the point of crying here?!”

Boo hoo.

“Are you going to keep embarrassing me here? Just wait until we get home.”

Her voice had grown cold and stern, and only then did Jae-in finally sniffle and take a step forward. But he still pouted, clearly not ready to let go of his anger.

“It’s because of Jeong Ye-na! If it weren’t for her, I would have come in first!”

“Getting beaten by a seven-year-old, and you’re talking about first place?!”

Naturally, Jae-in’s mother wouldn’t entertain such complaints.

“Let’s go! Do you even know how embarrassing this is?!”

Just as Ji-heon entered the Olympic handball arena, he paused at the sound of the name “Jeong Ye-na” coming from somewhere nearby.

Not far away, he saw Jae-in, who was sniffling, and his mother, who appeared upset, engaged in a small argument.

From what he could gather, it seemed that Ye-na and Jae-in had faced off against each other again. Jae-in, feeling overconfident, had likely been caught off guard by Ye-na’s true skill.

Ji-heon approached Jae-in with a smile.

“You’re here too?”

As Jae-in looked up, recognizing Ji-heon’s face, his eyebrows knitted together. Ji-heon asked gently, “Did you lose to our Ye-na?”

A friendly jab at the kid.

“It must be upsetting. Just study harder, okay?”

He could use some character development too.

Jae-in’s mother, having recognized Ji-heon, moved her body to shield Jae-in and hide him behind her. She seemed tense now that she was aware of Ji-heon’s presence.

“Let’s hurry and go!”

Jae-in’s mother pulled on her son’s hand again. But Jae-in was too angry to let it go. He shook off his mother’s hand and stood there, facing Ji-heon.

“Uncle, you work at a bar, right?”

“……What?”

Ji-heon raised an eyebrow at Jae-in’s unexpected and bold question.

“My mom said you work at a bar…”

“Stop it!”

Slam!

In the end, Jae-in’s mother slapped her son hard. It was such a strong hit that the child was thrown to the ground.

Last July, when Jae-in’s mother moved the children’s Go academy, she made a careless remark in front of Jae-in. She mentioned that Ye-na’s father looked rather delicate and seemed to work at a bar. Jae-in remembered this story and confronted Ji-heon about it.

However, after that, Jae-in’s mother learned the truth. Jeong Ji-heon was not a man working in a bar; he was the son of a CEO from a large corporation.

She never got the chance to tell Jae-in this fact. There was no opportunity to share the truth. In the end, since the information hadn’t been updated, Jae-in made an indiscreet remark and ended up getting slapped by his upset mother.

The hallway of the arena fell silent in an instant. Parents and children exiting the Go tournament watched the scene unfold. A few, thinking that this couldn’t be brushed off, immediately pulled out their phones.

“Hello? Is this the police station? I’d like to report child abuse.”

“What does that have to do with anything?! I’m just disciplining my son!”

As Jae-in’s mother approached the reporter to snatch their phone away, the reporter calmly countered, “Is she your biological mother? They say you shouldn’t hit even with flowers. How can you lay a hand on a child?!”

“I heard she was taking it out on the kid because he lost a match.”

“When did I do that?!”

As several people pressed her, Jae-in’s mother turned beet red. Just then, the police, who had been patrolling outside the building, came in after receiving the report.

“Is there someone who reported this?”

“Right here! This woman hit the child!”

“There’s a camera over there, so it must have recorded her abusing the child!”

Waaah! In the midst of this, Jae-in burst into tears again. More people started to gather.

Ji-heon stood quietly, observing the commotion, and slowly distanced himself from the scene, heading toward the spectator entrance.

Fortunately, it wasn’t hard to find Jeong No, sitting in the stands.

“Oppa!”

No, with a bright red nose and tears in her eyes, hugged Ji-heon tightly.

Ji-heon couldn’t help but be surprised.

“Why are you crying?!”

“Our Ye-na did so well!”

“That was a shock!”

“No, our Ye-na is amazing. She’s in the quarterfinals! This is not something to cry about!”

“It’s obvious Ye-na would do well. She takes after me, you know.”

Though he said it with pride, Ji-heon’s nonchalant response dulled No’s excitement.

Hmph.

No wiped her teary eyes and sat down to compose herself. Ji-heon contemplated whether to tell her about the incident outside but decided to hold back.

After sitting there with a pout, No glanced at Ji-heon and asked, “What happened with Chae Eun-yeob?”

“Life imprisonment.”

“Oh!”

Relieved by the good news, her spirits lifted immediately. Ji-heon, having anticipated this reaction from his wife, couldn’t help but smile secretly. He found it amusing to tease her.

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Quarterfinals, semifinals, and soon enough, the finals.

Having easily defeated her opponents in six matches, Ye-na finally stood before her last game.

The arena was buzzing with excitement. Everyone seemed surprised that a seven-year-old had made it to the finals.

Although she had experience playing in front of peers at the Go academy, this was the first time she was under the spotlight of so many people. Ye-na

felt a wave of nervousness wash over her.

Looking up, she spotted her mom and dad in the stands. It seemed they recognized that their eyes met, and they waved enthusiastically. It was the first time she had seen her usually dignified father looking so flustered.

Soon, her opponent arrived, finishing her own match.

The opponent was the winner of the last tournament in August. A second-grade sister.

“Hi, Ye-na. I’m Kang Sae-bom.”

The opponent greeted Ye-na after checking her name tag. Ye-na opened her mouth to speak.

“I’ve seen you play before.”

“Really? When?”

“On August 6th, at the tournament.”

Ye-na remembered the time she withdrew from the last tournament and went to the police station before returning to watch the finals. She recalled that match clearly.

“Were you there then?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you win a prize?”

“I lost back then.”

“Then you must have improved since then!”

Sae-bom accepted Ye-na’s words with a serious expression. Talking with Sae-bom seemed to ease Ye-na’s nerves.

As all eyes were on them, the match began.

Ye-na's eyes darted around quickly. The final match felt distinctly different from the previous games. It was as if she were competing against her teacher.

Yet Ye-na was someone who could continue to grow even within that environment. When Sae-bom made an unexpected move, her heart raced with curiosity.

"Why did you place it there?"

"I shouldn't tell you, but I'm trying to defend this side."

Though she said she shouldn't reveal her strategy, Sae-bom kindly responded to Ye-na's innocent question.

After a moment, as if trading questions, Sae-bom asked, "Why did you put yours here?"

"I thought you'd place it there."

Sae-bom also enjoyed the game. She wondered why she had only just met such a talented player.

"How old were you when you started playing Go?"

"Seven."

"So it's been less than a year for you?"

"Yeah. How about you?"

"I've been playing for two years."

As their voices occasionally rose, the referee shot them a glance. Sae-bom whispered to Ye-na, "The teacher said not to talk, so let's keep quiet."

"Okay."

The two focused on the match. Whenever Sae-bom found herself on the defensive, she would take a deep breath and calm herself. Ye-na fidgeted with her hands resting on her knees.

As their time limits dwindled evenly, Sae-bom was the first to enter the countdown phase.

Since it was an important match, the referee beside them began counting down.

“Last 10 seconds, one, two, three, four…”

Under pressure, Sae-bom made her move. It was a mistake. She sighed slowly, regretting the error.

As Ye-na quickly attacked, Sae-bom found her path blocked again.

Finally, it was the last countdown.

The referee started counting once more.

“Last 10 seconds, one, two…”

“I lost.”

Sae-bom accepted the result and laid down the stone she was holding. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Wow! You’re really good!”

But Sae-bom sincerely praised Ye-na.

The referee announced, “The winner of the lower grade division is Jeong Ye-na. The runner-up is Kang Sae-bom.”

Sae-bom reached out her hand to Ye-na first. Ye-na, who had been sitting there in a daze, broke into a bright smile. She took Sae-bom’s outstretched hand.

Applause and cheers erupted from all around.

“What’s your dream?”

“Police! What about you?”

“I want to become a professional Go player.”

“…….”

“There aren’t many female players who beat the male pros. So I want to try.”

The older sister spoke proudly about her dream, and Ye-na felt her heart swell with excitement.

“But I think you can do it too!”

“Then I’ll talk to my friend about it.”

“Why?”

“We decided to become police officers together.”

“Wow! That’s awesome!”

Just then, the arena doors opened, and the audience began to enter. Sae-bom’s mother was the first to come in. Jeong No and Ji-heon were still trying to find their way.

“Mom, I got second place!”

Sae-bom shouted to her mother in her slightly childish voice. The sister who had been so composed in front of Ye-na was now just another daughter, seeking her mother’s affection.

“Congratulations! Our princess!”

Sae-bom’s mother hugged her tightly. Sae-bom introduced Ye-na to her mother.

“I did well too, but she did better. But she’s only seven!”

“Really? Oh my! Congratulations! You’re amazing at Go!”

Sae-bom’s mother took Ye-na’s hand. Ye-na felt a warm sensation that made her happy.

“Can I call you?”

Sae-bom asked Ye-na.

“Sure!”

“Give me your phone number.”

Ye-na had made a Go friend.

Ji-heon and Jeong No rushed into the arena. Well, they didn’t exactly rush. Ji-heon walked quickly, carefully protecting his pregnant wife. He spotted Ye-na surrounded by people.

Jeong No could hardly contain her excitement.

“My daughter! My daughter!”

Everyone in the world! Look at my daughter!

My daughter is such an amazing child!

She wanted to shout out loud in the arena.

“Ye-na!”

“Mommy!”

Ye-na ran over, shouting. It was her father’s job to lift her up and hug her tightly.

“Ye-na, congratulations!”

“Dad, didn’t I say I would come in first? Aren’t I amazing?”

“Yes. You’re really amazing, our daughter.”

As the three shared an emotional reunion, a reporter intruded.

“Excuse me. May I have a moment for an interview with the winner?”

Ji-heon, noticing the camera in the reporter’s hands, spoke quietly.

“No pictures, please.”

“Understood.”

The reporter nodded, sensing Ji-heon’s serious demeanor.

“Jeong Ye-na, you competed in the lower grade division today and won. Congratulations! At what age did you start learning Go?”

“Seven years old.”

“That’s impressive. What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“A police officer! But I’m not sure yet.”

“Who do you admire the most?”

Listening to Ye-na’s interview, Jeong No and Ji-heon simultaneously swallowed hard.

What if she says her mom? What if she says her dad? Then I’ll have to do an interview too. If they ask how we raised such a smart child, what should I say? Should I just say it’s because of good genes?

Unaware of her parents' worries, Ye-na confidently answered.

"Lee Se-dol, the Go master!"

Jeong No and Ji-heon's mouths dropped open at their child's cheerful response.

Ch167 - I Just Need to Protect You

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The news of Ye-na winning the Go tournament spread widely within just a day. The secret behind it wasn’t a news article.

“Director Hwang, how have you been? Oh, work? I just called to check in. I heard your son got accepted to K University? Congratulations! Right, Ji-heon is there, so he’ll be a junior to him. Our Ji-heon is doing well. By the way, just yesterday, my granddaughter—Ye-na—came in first in the national Go tournament! She beat all the first, second, and third graders at just seven years old!”

The door to Chairman Jeong Jae-gwang’s office, which was usually closed, was wide open. His loud voice echoed through the office, causing the staff to smile and sigh in response.

“Executive Choi, I heard you were coughing the other day. Is your health okay? Yes, always take care of yourself. I didn’t sleep well last night either. Oh, it’s nothing serious. You know my granddaughter, right? She won first place in the national Go tournament! The little one, only seven years old, beat all the older kids and won a gold medal! I was so worried she might get too much attention for being this brilliant at such a young age that I couldn’t sleep.”

It was rare for Jae-gwang to check in on friends and executives—maybe twice a year at most—but today he called twenty people first. No matter what topic he started with, whether it was work, family, or health, the conversation always ended with his granddaughter.

Ji-heon, who was visiting the headquarters for regular business, peeked into the chairman's office, only to be pulled inside by Jae-gwang. Even while talking on the phone, Jae-gwang dragged Ji-heon to sit in front of him.

"Director Jo, did you read J Daily this morning? Then you must have seen the article about our granddaughter winning first in the Go tournament! Oh, congratulations are in order. Should I pass the business to her because she's so smart, or should I support her to become a Go master? I'm really worried!"

Ji-heon couldn't help but smile at the sight of his father, who was worried yet smiling broadly.

After finishing the call, Jae-gwang looked at Ji-heon and asked, "Does our Ye-na need anything? I need to get her a gift to celebrate her winning first place!"

"She'd probably love some snacks or candy."

"Great! I'll make the snacks in the shape of a gold medal!"

Jae-gwang's eyes lit up as he picked up a pen and paper. Thanks to his granddaughter, inspiration flowed through him again. He felt excited, just like when he used to develop snacks over twenty years ago.

Seeing his father so thrilled, Ji-heon gently said, "Dad, you shouldn't brag too much. And it's a secret that Ye-na is a genius."

"Why? Why is that?"

"If she gets too arrogant, Jeong-o wants it to be a secret."

"But won't Ye-na find out eventually?"

"That's what I'm worried about."

The serious and intense concerns shared between father and son made Jae-gwang's aide, who was nearby, suppress a smile by biting her lips.

Although Ji-heon lightly cautioned his father, his own pride in his daughter wasn’t much different.

Just the day before, Seung-kyu, who visited Ji-heon’s house to celebrate and was exhausted by his friend’s bragging, found himself caught again today while visiting Ji-heon’s office for work.

Ji-heon, with his friend sitting next to him, skipped the important topics and suddenly pulled out a video of Ye-na’s final match.

“Do you want to watch our Ye-na play?”

“No.”

“Come on. Just watch.”

“I clearly said I didn’t want to.”

Seung-kyu stared at the video with clouded eyes.

“Look! She’s so good, right?”

“I can’t really see it.”

“You can just look at her hands. Look at the decisive movements of her hands. Isn’t it amazing?”

In my eyes, you’re the one who’s amazing.

What happened to my once-composed friend?

“Hey, can I give you a piece of advice as your precious friend?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“You shouldn’t act like this in public. Especially not to other employees.”

“……”

“I can show you this because you’re my friend and I know Ye-na well, but you shouldn’t force other people to watch or demand their opinions.”

“I won’t do that. I know.”

“……”

“I’m showing it to you because you’re my precious friend.”

Ugh, is this guy a total fox?

Every time Ji-heon referred to him as a “precious friend,” the soft-hearted Seung-kyu’s heart raced, and he sighed with a sad expression. Unfazed by Seung-kyu’s reaction, Ji-heon continued to shove his phone screen in front of him.

“Come on, look at this. Didn’t see it properly? I’ll slow it down to 0.5x speed. Watch closely.”

Watching it again at 1.5x speed was already a struggle, but now to see it at 0.5x speed… buddy…

“Wow, now that I’m really watching it, her movements are incredibly decisive…”

Even so, Seung-kyu generously accepted Ji-heon’s bragging about his daughter.

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Yesterday, Jeong-o, who was overly excited, had calmed down a bit. There was a good reason for that—he had colleagues to celebrate with.

Surprisingly, Deputy Ko Eun-joo openly expressed her joy and congratulated him.

“Ye-na really has it all: a brilliant mind, a beautiful face, and an angelic mother… and just a wealthy dad.”

Eun-joo seemed to struggle for a long time to find the right adjective for Ji-heon, and finally finished her sentence. Although it was sincere, she didn't want it to be obvious that she didn't like Executive Jeong Ji-heon, so she quickly continued.

"Isn't Ye-na the perfect child? What can she not do?"

In response to Eun-joo's question, Jeong-o replied.

"She can't draw."

"That's quite greedy of her. Seven-year-olds are like that. How bad can she be at drawing?"

"She takes after her dad."

"Oh no, that's quite a problem."

If Jeong-o hadn't been there, Eun-joo would have muttered something like, "Does Executive Jeong Ji-heon have nothing to pass on to his daughter other than that?" But given the situation, she swallowed her gossip.

"A seven-year-old winning first place? The Go site's forums are buzzing."

Park Young-gwang, who usually kept an eye on the Go site's forums, added his surprise. Gi-hoon also visited the Go site's forums that Young-gwang had mentioned and clicked on a few posts.

"Oh? But what now? The meaning of the executive blocking interview photos is lost. I think there's a personal video. It's a video of Ye-na's match from a distance."

At those words, Jeong-o rushed to Gi-hoon's desk. Indeed, upon clicking a certain post, he found a video. Although Ye-na's face was blurry from the distance, it was still recognizable.

As Jeong-o browsed the forums to see if there were any other videos, Eun-joo called out to him.

“Um… you should see this too, Deputy.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“There’s an article saying Ye-na’s dad is Executive Jeong Ji-heon.”

Jeong-o immediately moved over to Eun-joo’s desk. The article was displayed prominently on her PC screen.

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Article Title:

Ye-na Jeong (7), winner of the 30th National Children’s Go Tournament, becomes the center of attention.

In a national Go tournament aimed at elementary school students, it is unprecedented for a 6-year-old preschooler to win first place, stirring excitement in the Go community.

Meanwhile, Ye-na’s father is Jeong Ji-heon, the second son of the chairman of Seorun Group, Jeong Jae-gwang. It is reported that he attended the tournament with his wife, Lee Mo, to watch Ye-na’s match.

Ji-heon and Lee Mo completed their marriage registration in July of this year but have not yet held a wedding ceremony.

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A leisurely evening.

As Dobin sat at Ye-na’s house, he stumbled over the words of the news article about Ye-na’s Go tournament victory that Ji-heon had printed out that morning.

After reading through it a few times, Dobin pointed to a line in the article and said to Ye-na, “But you made a mistake here.”

“Why?”

“You said you promised to become a police officer with a friend. You should say you promised with your friend Park Dobin.”

“Oh, right. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. But next time, make sure to say my name. Got it?”

“Yeah, I understand.”

Ye-na nodded firmly at Dobin’s request, but he still tilted his head, pondering.

“But you could also become a Go player instead of a police officer.”

“I’m not sure yet. Mom says I don’t have to decide right now.”

Dobin rolled his eyes in deep thought and then nodded. Becoming a police officer together with Ye-na sounded good, but it didn’t seem necessary. They each had their own strengths.

Ye-na tentatively asked, “Is it okay if I become a Go player instead of a police officer?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I can be a police officer and protect you.”

Sitting quietly in the kitchen, Jeong-o overheard the sweet conversation between the kids and smiled softly. Her heart felt a little choked up. Dobin’s kind words about wanting to protect Ye-na made her feel overwhelmed.

Even that little child is saying such wonderful things about wanting to protect my daughter.

“Mom, I think I’ve only been thinking about myself.”

Jeong-o spoke to Guk-soon, who was sitting next to her.

“I wanted to have a second child, recover, lose weight, and then have a wedding. Meanwhile, Ye-na will just keep growing.”

Caught up in the desire to wear a beautiful wedding dress, she hadn't considered Ye-na at all. Only after checking that shabby news article did she snap back to reality.

To raise Ye-na like a normal child, there are special things that shouldn't be too obvious. The family history of changing her last name after finding her dad after seven years, the circumstances behind her parents registering their marriage late.

The wedding was the same. By next year, Ye-na would be starting elementary school, and she wouldn't need to face questions from her new friends like, "Why are your mom and dad only having a wedding now?"

Ye-na should just be special for being Ye-na. She shouldn't have to bear the shadows of her parents' heartfelt story in her life.

"Mom, I think we should have the wedding this year."

With determination, Jeong-o said to Guk-soon.

Jae-gwang hoped the two would quickly have the wedding, but Guk-soon opposed it. Jeong-o was relaying the words he found difficult to say to his parents.

"I'm sorry that you went through the trouble to tell my father and mother, but it seems like there are all these complications."

"What are you worried about? It's not that difficult."

Guk-soon replied as if it were nothing, as always.

This time, she quickly understood Jeong-o's concerns. She could empathize with her daughter's desire to wear a beautiful wedding dress and the current feelings of sacrificing that wish for the sake of the child.

"You can say anything like that. Even if you change your mind a dozen times, I can say it for you."

Daughter, you should protect your daughter.

I need to protect my daughter.

We can live like that.

Guk-soon’s lighthearted response eased Jeong-o’s worries.

“Okay. I’ll have to tell him when he comes.”

A little while later, Ye-na came running from playing with Dobin.

“Mom, I want to go to an art academy.”

“Really? You want to go to both the Go academy and the art academy?”

“Yep!”

“Why do you suddenly want to go to art academy?”

“Because I want to draw well.”

“Do you want to draw better than you do now?”

“Yeah. If I get better, I think Dad will get better too. He takes after me!”

Ye-na’s innocent answer brought a smile to Jeong-o’s face.

Changing hearts help each other grow.

Ch168 - An Imperfect Day

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In December, although it wasn’t too cold and Jeong-o had been feeling relaxed, today, for some reason, snowflakes started to fall from early dawn. It was snow that hadn’t even been in the weather forecast.

As Jeong-o looked out the window, a sense of worry crossed her face.

It was the first snow of the season, but Jeong-o couldn’t feel happy about it. Snow would make the roads slippery, cause traffic jams, and lead to complaints from people.

Unconsciously, Jeong-o muttered, “It’s ruined, it’s ruined…”

“Mom, are we ruined?”

Ye-na, who had woken up by now, approached and asked. She had also just stirred from her light sleep. Surprised, Jeong-o stumbled over her words.

“Uh, it’s just…”

“Because it’s snowing?”

“Yeah.”

“I like it when it snows!”

Ye-na shouted with an excited voice.

Right. If my daughter likes it, then it must be a good thing.

Before she knew it, Jeong-o had started to think like Guk-soon.

The snow was falling heavily enough that Team Leader Seong Mi-ran left home early and arrived at the wedding venue quite early.

She always looked beautiful, but today she looked even more stunning, making it seem as if she could soar to the heavens. As she exchanged greetings with Jeong-o and walked on, she ran into Gi-hoon, who had also arrived early.

“Team Leader, you’re here early?”

“Yeah. At hotel weddings, you have to come early to save your seat.”

Mi-ran’s belief made Gi-hoon nod silently. Usually, he would have laughed heartily, but seeing him nod quietly made Mi-ran feel concerned.

“Gi-hoon, don’t cry.”

“Huh? Why would I cry?”

“Just… don’t cry.”

“Ah, Team Leader, don’t tease me.”

Gi-hoon’s face flushed slightly as he waved his hands. Just then, Eun-joo also arrived at the venue and rushed over.

Upon seeing Gi-hoon, Eun-joo immediately said, “Are you okay, Gi-hoon? You didn’t have to come.”

“Why wouldn’t I come? Of course, I had to!”

“Here. I prepared this for you. A handkerchief.”

“Ah, Deputy!”

“Make sure to wash it clean and return it.”

Gi-hoon let out a weary sigh as he accepted the handkerchief. It was obvious that if he continued to refuse and deny it, these people would tease him even more.

“I thought you wouldn’t come, but here you are.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You don’t like the Director.”

“I don’t, but I can’t help it.”

“…”

“Capitalism has its demands.”

Eun-joo’s tired complaint made Gi-hoon smile, but his expression soon turned serious. Without realizing that he had stiffened, Eun-joo spoke in a low voice.

“There aren’t many people for a chaebol wedding. I guess the Director doesn’t have many friends.”

“That’s true.”

Gasp.

Eun-joo turned her head at the dark voice coming from behind. Ji-heon was standing there. Even in Eun-joo’s eyes, who didn’t like him, Ji-heon looked quite handsome today. It was enough to make her think that he might actually suit Jeong-o.

“I don’t have many friends.”

“…”

“So, you need to take lots of pictures pretending to be close.”

But Eun-joo couldn’t adapt to Ji-heon’s joking manner. She tried to slip away from him with a capitalist smile, but Ji-heon called out to her again.

“Have you seen Jeong-o?”

“She’s in the bride’s waiting room right now. Haven’t you seen her?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“…”

“If you haven’t seen Jeong-o because she’s so pretty, then you should hurry up and go see her.”

…On this joyous day, I can’t even curse!

Eun-joo suppressed the urge to scream and turned her head away with a blank expression. At least, she quickly found an escape route. She recognized the princess Ye-na, whom she had only heard about and seen in photos.

“You must be Princess Ye-na!”

“Yeah. Who are you?”

Wearing a white dress and a tiara, Ye-na blinked her big eyes, making it feel like a princess had appeared right out of an animation.

Eun-joo’s voice rose gracefully, as if it could rival fine porcelain and jade. Gi-hoon, who had stiffened due to Ji-heon, began to twitch his nose.

“She’s a colleague from my mom’s company. Her name is Ko Eun-joo.”

“Oh! Princess Deputy!”

As Ye-na showed a delighted reaction, Eun-joo became even more excited.

“That’s right! You’re a princess too! Nice to meet you, Princess Ye-na!”

A meeting of princesses from different worlds was happening.

Gi-hoon, unable to adapt to Eun-joo’s affectionate sisterly demeanor, fell silent.

The time for the ceremony drew near.

The preparation bell rang, and Ji-heon entered the bride’s waiting room.

Even four months pregnant, Jeong-o looked stunning in her wedding dress. Of course, it was due to her perfect choice of dress, but despite her complaints about gaining weight from eating well during her pregnancy, Jeong-o’s figure was that of a goddess with hardly any excess fat.

Ji-heon found himself lost in admiration, forgetting that this was his own wedding.

Even as he recognized that the ceremony was about to start, he stood still for a moment, feeling the warmth gather around his eyes. It was reminiscent of the scenery from seven years ago. He felt the same guilt for making his pregnant girlfriend wear a wedding dress as he had back then.

It felt like he was reclaiming lost time. For just today, he felt like he could turn back to seven years ago.

“Are you ready?”

“… Huuuu.”

At Ji-heon’s gentle voice, Jeong-o exhaled a long sigh, her face tense.

A dress that wouldn’t be too much for the baby. Beautiful, stable shoes. And a husband who would hold her hand and walk down the wedding road together.

Everything was perfect, yet she felt a growing stiffness in her body.

She had raised a child, but this was her first wedding.

It was her first event where she was the main character in front of her child.

Sensing Jeong-o's nervousness, Ji-heon spoke.

"Should I carry you?"

A smile broke out on Jeong-o's previously frozen face. However, Ji-heon was serious. If Jeong-o couldn't take a single step, he felt he could carry her and walk boldly.

What wouldn't he do for the bride he wanted to give the moon and stars?

Just then, outside the waiting room, Ye-na waved her hand.

"Mom, hi! I'll go first!"

Today's ceremony would begin with the entrance of Ye-na and Do-bin. People erupted in exclamations as they watched the flower girls, who had taken their positions at the entrance of the hall.

Gathering her spirits, Jeong-o stood up from her seat. Ji-heon held her hand as they made their way to the entrance, where the ceremony was set to begin.

Amidst cheers, applause, and laughter, the beautifully dressed Ye-na and Do-bin entered, each holding a basket. The two children scattered the flower petals from their baskets onto the wedding road, just as they had practiced the day before. However, after just five steps, Do-bin stopped.

"Uh? I don't have any flower petals left."

The big-hearted Do-bin had emptied his flower petal basket in three handfuls. Since there were no petals in the basket during their practice the day before, he hadn't gauged how many times he should sprinkle them.

The two children stood still, peering into their baskets. People burst into laughter as they watched the kids seriously examine their empty baskets.

Only the faces of two adults turned pale. Seung-kyu and Jin-seo.

Just as Jin-seo was about to rush to her son,

“I’ll share mine with you. Use it sparingly.”

Ye-na calmly handed some of her flower petals to Do-bin without a hint of panic.

As the two children calmly resolved the problem, the crowd erupted in applause, as if they had all made a silent agreement. Seung-kyu and Jin-seo both let out simultaneous sighs of relief.

The fairy-like entrance of the two children concluded without incident, and now it was time for the bride and groom to enter.

The atmosphere in the hall changed dramatically. All the lights except for the ones on the wedding road were turned off, and the spotlight illuminated the bride and groom.

Startled by the sudden lighting, Jeong-o blinked as the light flooded into her eyes. She could clearly see the path she was to walk. If she had to walk down that path alone, it would feel daunting, but having someone beside her holding her hand gave her reassurance.

At the end of that path stood her mother, Ye-na, and her parents-in-law.

The four people waiting for her were like another set of guiding lights.

As she walked, she noticed that flower petals had accumulated in some places along the path. Jeong-o, unaware of what had just occurred in the hall, could only imagine.

Had some child poured all the petals out of their basket?

Was that why people were laughing and clapping?

Imagining that scene, Jeong-o couldn’t help but smile.

While perfection is nice, imperfections are good too.

In our memories, imperfect moments often linger longer than a perfect whole.

Strangely, imperfect days create perfect happiness.

As Jeong-o walked on the flower path made by the children, she thought that she no longer had to wait for the flower rain.

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The wedding ceremony ended safely, but the snow did not stop. The snow that had briefly paused during the ceremony began to fall heavily again.

Flights were canceled, and their honeymoon would be delayed by a day.

She had been looking forward to the first-class flight…

But Ji-heon smiled, saying it was for the best. She would find out why the next day.

“Hey, Jeong-o.”

Ji-heon woke Jeong-o up at five in the morning.

“No… what time is it…?”

Jeong-o grumbled as she struggled to lift her heavy eyelids. Just then, a sparrow-like voice chimed in.

“Mom! Wake up! Let’s go see the snow!”

Ye-na and Ji-heon were already up and fully geared.

Reluctantly, Jeong-o got out of bed, dragging her feet.

“You want to go see the snow at this hour?”

She wondered if Ye-na had been pestering her dad, but for some reason, Ji-heon looked even more excited than Ye-na. After thinking it over, she

realized that while she had spent spring, summer, and autumn with Ji-heon, she had spent winter alone. This would be their first winter together, their first snowfall.

She almost missed the joy of the first snow because of the wedding.

As soon as she bundled up and stepped into the living room, Guk-soon opened her door.

“Where are you off to at this hour?”

“They’re going to see the snow. Mom, come with us!”

Jeong-o pleaded with Guk-soon, sounding like a child. Guk-soon smiled, as if she couldn’t refuse, and went back into her room to put on her coat.

The apartment was still quiet, like the dead of night.

No, it was even quieter than midnight.

The world, dusted with fresh snow, looked as if it were covered in a fluffy white blanket, serene and still.

The child gasped at the thick snow covering the ground.

“Wow!”

Ye-na stamped her feet in the untouched snow, leaving impressions as if she were marking her territory. She exclaimed with delight every time she saw her sinking footprints.

“Daddy! Look! My footprints are huge!”

“Are those really Ye-na’s footprints? Or did a bear walk by?”

“No! They’re Ye-na’s footprints!”

At Ji-heon’s joke, Ye-na giggled and walked over again. The sound of the child’s laughter seemed to linger in the snowy path marked by her

footprints.

Ji-heon had fulfilled his wish from seven years ago: to let her be the first to step into the fresh snow.

Ye-na and Ji-heon, playing in the snow like happy puppies on a snowy day, looked wonderful together. However, Jeong-o began to feel increasingly cold. She gestured for them to come back inside, but Ye-na pointed at the pristine snowfield.

“Mom, can’t I lie down here?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll catch a cold.”

“But you just have to not get sick!”

“Do you think colds come with permission? If I say no, then it’s no.”

Why did children want to lie down in the snow?

Jeong-o didn’t understand, so she shot back firmly, but Guk-soon muttered beside her.

“You’re just like her. Just like her.”

“I’m not like anything.”

“You did the same thing when you were her age.”

While Jeong-o stood there in shock, Ji-heon persuaded her.

“Let’s let her do it just once.”

“Hehe!”

As soon as Ji-heon showed signs of giving permission, Ye-na flopped down into the snow. Jeong-o immediately scolded her again.

“You’ll freeze!”

“Daddy will warm me up. Let me!”

“Wow!”

Ye-na lay back, flailing her arms and legs as if she had turned into a baby again, a blissful smile spreading across her face.

“Mom, Ye-na has melted away.”

At those words, Jeong-o felt herself melting too.

Jeong-o pressed the button on her phone to capture the moment, snapping a picture of the rosy-nosed Ye-na and Ji-heon together. Guk-soon glanced at the photo.

“They look alike.”

“Exactly. They’re just like each other.”

“You’re the same too. You all look alike.”

“Then Mom is the same too. Mom looks just like me!”

Jeong-o’s retort made Guk-soon burst into laughter.

In the meantime, Ji-heon draped his coat over Jeong-o’s shoulders. The warmth he had was transferred to her.

Jeong-o thought that this moment right now was the most beautiful moment of her life.

And so, the main story concludes.

Ch169 - [Extra] Working Dad (1)

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The year-end night was brightly adorned with colorful lights, yet employees had no time to enjoy it.

After their honeymoon, Jeong-o and Ji-heon found themselves buried in work. The only source of vitality came from the fresh-faced interns who had just joined the company.

Max Planning’s internship program was popular among college students, as it offered a chance to secure a full-time position after two months of evaluations by executives and practical staff.

In the bustling Production Team 2, an intern had joined. She was a 23-year-old female student hoping to become a copywriter.

“Actually, I wanted to bring in a male intern, but Director Jeong Ji-heon personally selected her,” Team Leader Seong Mi-ran hinted to Jeong-o on their way to meet the intern.

Oh, how considerate of Director Jeong Ji-heon.

Meanwhile, their colleague Song Gi-hoon was eyeing any opportunity to send her to a different team.

Jeong-o sighed deeply, her gaze cloudy.

Even after getting married and announcing their relationship to the company, Ji-heon’s behavior hadn’t changed.

He would always linger around Jeong-o for at least an hour each day, keeping an eye on who was trying to flirt with her or causing her trouble, often making excuses to be nearby.

So far, this hadn’t led to any major problems, but it was entirely possible that someone might feel disgruntled about it.

If either Ji-heon or Jeong-o made any mistakes, it could escalate the situation. So, Jeong-o became even more cautious.

“Hello! I’m intern Kim Bo-ram.”

While lost in thought, Team Leader Seong Mi-ran brought in the intern. The intern had a youthful face that naturally invited smiles.

“Kim Bo-ram, this is designer Ko Eun-joo, employee Song Gi-hoon, PD Park Young-kwang, and this is copywriter Lee Jeong-o.”

“Oh, you’re the copywriter! Hello! Nice to meet you!”

Bo-ram greeted Jeong-o brightly after Mi-ran’s introduction. Jeong-o welcomed her back warmly.

“I’m glad to meet you too. Let’s get along well.”

“Since Kim Bo-ram aspires to be a copywriter, it would be best for Lee Jeong-o to mentor her,” Mi-ran suggested as she organized the seating. Jeong-o felt a sense of positive energy returning after a long time.

Bo-ram maintained a cheerful expression and carried out her tasks diligently. With Bo-ram around, a smile rarely left Jeong-o’s face.

“Kim Bo-ram, your expression is so bright. You hear that a lot, don’t you?” Jeong-o asked.

“Not necessarily. The atmosphere in our team is so good and warm,” Bo-ram replied.

“…….”

“And I think our department director is really cool!”

Jeong-o’s eyes widened at the unexpected confession.

“Ah… Director Jeong Ji-heon?”

“Yes! I thought he was a model. How can he be so good-looking?”

“…….”

“How old is he? He can’t be older than his early thirties; he must be incredibly capable!”

It seemed she hadn’t heard anything at all.

Jeong-o pursed her lips as she listened to Bo-ram excitedly share her thoughts.

“I had a brief conversation with Director Jeong earlier, and I was so moved when he encouraged me that Production Team 2 is a really busy team but also a talented one, so there’s a lot to learn here. He’s really sweet and gentle.”

Sweet and gentle?

Those words had never been used to describe someone from the same company.

Is our director managing his image?

If he was indeed managing his image, there would be no need to reveal the truth so early. Jeong-o decided to indulge in a bit more praise for her husband, finding unexpected joy in Bo-ram’s words.

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As the day passed, Bo-ram’s admiration for Ji-heon grew even stronger.

During lunchtime, as she set her tray down in front of Eun-joo, she spoke with enthusiasm.

“I overheard Director Jeong Ji-heon talking with the AE earlier. He speaks so well and has incredible charisma!”

If Jeong-o had been present, the praise would have been well-received, but Bo-ram had chosen her audience poorly. Eun-joo stared at Bo-ram with an expressionless face, yet Bo-ram didn’t stop talking.

“He had this furrowed brow while he was speaking, but his voice was so nice that he felt like a celebrity. Even if the director got angry, I don’t think I’d feel bad about it.”

Eun-joo, who had been quietly listening, looked as if she had just eaten something unpleasant.

Interrupting Bo-ram, Eun-joo replied sternly, “Bo-ram, shouldn’t you feel bad if the director gets angry?”

“Oh… I was just speaking hypothetically, that if Director Jeong got angry, it would be because I did something wrong… since he’s the director.”

“Well, do you really think all directors have sound judgment?”

Since Eun-joo wasn’t responding, Bo-ram began to sense the tension and fell silent. Dejected, she didn’t speak for the rest of the meal. Only after leaving the cafeteria did she whisper to Jeong-o, who she felt most comfortable with.

“Ko Eun-joo seems a bit scary.”

Did she say something harsh to her? Jeong-o was puzzled but reassured Bo-ram, patting her shoulder.

“But once you get to know her, she’s really lovely. She does her job well and is very straightforward. You’ll learn a lot from her.”

“Hmm. Still, she’s scary to me.”

Bo-ram muttered softly as she continued walking.

Not long after returning to the office from lunch, something happened.

“Assistant! Lee Jeong-o!”

Bo-ram called Jeong-o excitedly from the meeting room.

“What’s going on, Bo-ram?” Jeong-o asked as she passed by.

“Could you come over here? I need your help with this.”

Bo-ram was holding a portable crib in her hands.

Jeong-o’s team was starting a presentation for a baby products brand, which meant various items had been brought to the meeting room.

However, the portable crib had an issue. Two screws at the legs were loose, and it looked like it might tip over.

Startled, Jeong-o quickly helped Bo-ram set the crib upright. As soon as it was upright, Bo-ram let go of it. Once she did, the crib began to tilt again. Jeong-o realized she couldn’t let go now; if she did, the other leg would break.

“The screws on the crib are loose, and it looks like it’s going to fall. Can you hold it like this for a moment? I’ll quickly grab a tool to tighten the screws,” she said.

“Um… Bo-ram…”

Before Jeong-o could give any other instructions, Bo-ram had already left.

Since it was a portable crib, there should be a wrench included in the package. Jeong-o didn’t get a chance to tell her that before she left.

“Kids these days are really quick.”

Jeong-o found herself awkwardly holding onto the crib. Given its weight, it was becoming increasingly difficult to stay in the same position. She had expected Bo-ram to return quickly, but there was still no sign of her.

After about ten minutes of waiting, someone suddenly approached from behind and took hold of the crib, relieving Jeong-o of her burden.

It was none other than Ji-heon. His radar for finding Jeong-o had kicked in.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his expression stern.

“Director! I found the wrench!” Bo-ram exclaimed happily as she ran over, holding the tool aloft. She quickly positioned her hands together in front of her.

“Hello, Director.”

“What are you doing? You should be holding it!” Ji-heon scolded.

“Oh, yes, yes!”

At Ji-heon’s impatient tone, Bo-ram dashed back to support the tilted crib.

Ji-heon took the wrench from Bo-ram and tightened the screws on the crib. After checking the balance, he stood up and directed his attention to the two of them.

“Who told Lee Jeong-o to hold this?”

Bo-ram froze at his authoritative voice.

Feeling that Bo-ram might get scolded, Jeong-o quickly spoke up. “I said I would hold it.”

“Why?”

“I thought it would be quicker for Kim Bo-ram to find the wrench.”

“So, did Kim Bo-ram find it quickly?”

“Yes, she found it quickly…”

“She hasn’t answered her phone in ten minutes.”

Realizing that Jeong-o hadn’t known that Ji-heon had been trying to call, her cheeks flushed. The revelation that she had been holding the crib for ten minutes without help left Bo-ram looking pale.

“Don’t you think about your own health?” Ji-heon said, turning his attention to Jeong-o.

“Kim Bo-ram should have considered the pregnant woman, too.”

Bo-ram’s eyes widened.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t know…”

“Make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

With that, Ji-heon left the meeting room, leaving the atmosphere as cold as ice. At least it had ended without any further consequences.

After Ji-heon left, Bo-ram’s complexion quickly returned to normal.

“Assistant, you should have said something! You look so slim that I didn’t realize you were pregnant. So you’ve gotten married, too? That’s amazing!”

Instead of being disheartened, Bo-ram’s upbeat demeanor made Jeong-o feel relieved.

“Director Jeong Ji-heon is amazing, too! I never thought he would remember my name. And it’s so touching that he cares for pregnant women!”

Wait, is that really a good thing?

Jeong-o couldn’t bring herself to correct Bo-ram. It seemed that she was quite smitten.

Bo-ram began looking for another opportunity to meet Ji-heon again. As Ji-heon had pointed out, she felt like she had made a big mistake.

During the evaluation period, it was important not to give her supervisor any reason to criticize her, but it felt like she had made a blunder. Bo-ram decided to personally present the Production Team 2 expense report to Ji-heon.

Knocking on the door, she entered Ji-heon's office.

Ji-heon glanced at her as she walked in but quickly returned to his work.

"Director, I made a mistake earlier. I'll be more careful in the future," Bo-ram said, bowing politely as she handed him the approval documents.

"And here's the expense report for Production Team 2."

"Okay."

Ji-heon took it and tossed it aside.

Bo-ram's cheeks turned red with embarrassment. She hesitated to leave, feeling regretful about having to walk out like this. As she looked around nervously, she caught sight of a photo frame.

It was a picture of an exotic restaurant. In it, a younger Ji-heon was sitting across from a woman with long hair, both of them looking at the camera. The woman looked a bit like Lee Jeong-o.

Before she could stop herself, she asked, "Is this a family photo of yours, Director?"

The picture had been taken seven years ago in Melbourne. Ji-heon, with his usual stoic expression, answered curtly, "Yes."

"Your younger sibling looks a lot like Lee Jeong-o."

"They're the same person."

“Uh…? Are Lee Jeong-o and your sibling related?”

Ji-heon is a Jeong, and Lee Jeong-o is an Yi—what’s going on here?

Are they siblings, or are they cousins?

Or could there be… a secret about their birth?

As Bo-ram blinked in confusion, Ji-heon said, “They’re not siblings; they’re married.”

“…….”

“Didn’t Lee Jeong-o tell you?”

Bo-ram froze at Ji-heon’s disdainful expression, feeling embarrassed as her face turned beet red.

Feeling defeated, Bo-ram left Ji-heon’s office and returned to her seat, where she sat with her head down, staring blankly before approaching Jeong-o.

“Assistant, I just came back from seeing Director Jeong Ji-heon.”

“Oh, really?”

“……I’m sorry for not recognizing it….”

As Bo-ram bowed her head, Jeong-o sighed heavily, having understood the underlying meaning of her words.

“Ugh. Is he really bothering you about that again? You didn’t know until now?”

“No, no.”

“……”

“He just told me the truth. But….”

Bo-ram spoke with a trembling voice, “I think the director’s impression has changed a bit. He seemed a little… scary today.”

“That’s really true, Bo-ram.”

“Really…?”

“He’s always been like that.”

Jeong-o gently reassured Bo-ram and then went to find Ji-heon, wanting to know what had happened in the office to make Bo-ram so downcast.

However, before Jeong-o could even speak, Ji-heon bluntly asked, “Why didn’t you tell them about me?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The part where I’m your husband.”

“Oh, that.”

Jeong-o scratched her nose awkwardly.

She felt good hearing nice things about him, but the truth was still what it was.

“So, what?”

“What do you mean, ‘so, what’? Why do you say it like that?”

“Talking about that just makes the intern uncomfortable. Besides, she’ll find out soon enough anyway. Bo-ram said she liked how handsome her brother was. It’s not a bad thing for him to get some compliments on his looks.”

“Just compliments on his looks? Is that all I have?”

Ji-heon’s serious response left Jeong-o feeling troubled.

Kim Bo-ram, this is the reality of the man you momentarily admired. It’s incredibly childish. It’s frustrating that I can’t reveal this to you myself.

Ch170 - [Side Story] Working Dad (2)

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Jeong-o spoke calmly but pointedly.

“Think about the karma you’ve built up. When you talk to the employees, your eyebrows are always furrowed by 0.5 cm. Who would feel comfortable talking to you?”

But soon she became emotional.

“Do you think, as your wife, that the employees will come to me and only say nice things about you? No. They ask me to relay messages to you. They want me to tell you not to make them sit next to each other while editing project proposals, not to just throw out random instructions with incomprehensible drawings, and not to glare at the man sitting next to me in the meeting room.”

Before she knew it, Jeong-o had become the company’s sounding board. She listened to the employees’ grievances, soothing those who needed comfort… Of course, it hadn’t been easy for her either.

So she let Bo-ram be. Even though it had only been two days, it felt good to hear nice things about her husband.

Ji-heon was surprised. He had never realized the effort Jeong-o had put into hiding her struggles.

“Is that why people say Ji-heon is coming to the company just to follow Lee Jeong-o?”

…But that was true, and he had no rebuttal. The only reason he came to Max Planning was to protect Jeong-o.

His main job was merely a side task.

Having expressed herself clearly, Jeong-o advised, “Now go back to headquarters.”

“Why, why is the conversation turning that way?”

Ji-heon stumbled over his words, flustered.

“This is for your future. Now go back to headquarters.”

“How is that for my future? I know my future best.”

“Then work hard. Don’t waste your time following me around.”

Ji-heon felt wronged. It seemed his wife couldn’t see how busy he was.

“Do you think I’m not working hard? I finish all my tasks and then follow you.”

“A leader shouldn’t relax just because their tasks are done. You should look for other things to do.”

Am I relaxing? Do you think I’m just playing around?

I put in only 70% of my energy into work, but since meeting you, I’ve been pouring in 80%.

Can’t you see my effort?

However, Jeong-o’s response was cold.

“If you can’t focus on your work because you’re worried about me, it’s really better for you to go back to headquarters.”

With that, Jeong-o turned away.

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Being a leader is a lonely position. Even when frustrated, one must work.

Ji-heon went to the conference room ahead of a competitive presentation meeting. Jeong-o had already arrived and was reviewing the products with the production team members. As Ji-heon entered, everyone greeted him, but Jeong-o didn’t even glance his way.

Keep it up.

With narrowed eyes, Ji-heon shot a glare at Jeong-o before taking a seat.

Once everyone had gathered, the team leader of the planning team stood up to begin the briefing.

“‘You Are Yours’ is a childcare product brand launched by ‘AiPoom’ three years ago, which has established itself as a sturdy national stroller brand. It has gained a lot of love for its baby clothes and functional clothing. This year, it has achieved unprecedented success with the development of baby carriers and temperature-sensing bathtubs, and next year, it plans to introduce assembly beds and baby chairs. The products mentioned are set up in front for your review.”

The bidding amount, including production costs, is around 6 billion. It’s quite a scale, so two production teams were assigned.

“Production Team 1 consists of married individuals, while Production Team 2, considering that Assistant Lee Jeong-o is currently raising children and preparing for childbirth, will likely approach things more realistically. If possible, I think it would boost the advertiser’s trust if Assistant Lee presents the production presentation directly… But please don’t feel pressured.”

The planning team leader cautiously suggested, glancing at Ji-heon, who came to work to protect Jeong-o.

Jeong-o nodded enthusiastically.

“I also think it would be best for me to participate in this presentation, at least to attend the PT. If we succeed, it would be a way of showing filial piety before the baby is born.”

Everyone smiled comfortably at Jeong-o’s positive response. In the cheerful atmosphere, opinions flowed freely. Ji-heon also spoke up.

“I really think it would be better for Lee Jeong-o to handle the production presentation.”

Everyone exchanged looks of agreement. They seemed relieved that Ji-heon had made the decision. Jeong-o also revealed her enthusiasm, smiling brightly for the first time in a while. However, everyone was taken aback by Ji-heon’s next words.

“If that’s the case, I’ll handle the planning presentation.”

It felt as if the air had been sucked out of the room. Everyone’s jaws dropped in disbelief.

Only Ji-heon smiled softly, staring intently at Jeong-o as if to say,

“Just wait and see.”

I’m putting in all this effort to be by your side.

After the meeting ended, Jeong-o angrily chased after Ji-heon.

“Why are you presenting?”

“Didn’t you see the headquarters director presenting at the competitive pitch?”

Of course, Jeong-o had seen it many times. In her previous company, it was common for executives to directly present the planning proposals. It was a way to show enthusiasm for the client’s advertising campaign.

But that was the realm of experienced professionals.

“Are you confident?”

Jeong-o asked anxiously.

“Don’t you trust me?”

“It’s not trust I need; it’s certainty.”

Ji-heon’s baseless confidence worried her. Still, Jeong-o was the person who believed in and supported Ji-heon the most. She firmly added her best advice based on her current situation.

“Don’t just think you can push employees around and grab materials to make a quick presentation. If you’re going to present, you need to prepare the proposal yourself. Everyone does that.”

“…”

“And show the practical staff who have never seen you present how things are going so they won’t feel uneasy. Hold a mid-presentation and rehearsals. Everyone does that.”

Ji-heon furrowed his brows for a moment but didn’t argue with Jeong-o’s requests. Concerned that her words might not be taken seriously, Jeong-o added an extra note.

“Want me to tell you an important fact?”

“…”

“I have a 100% success rate. I’ve never lost a pitch I’ve presented. I’ve won all ten times I’ve done it.”

Ji-heon’s previously arrogant demeanor softened for a moment as her words sank in.

“If we don’t win this pitch, it’ll all be your fault.”

Thus began a competition between the couple to see who would perform better.

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The competition between the married couple intensified day by day. Ji-heon was busy creating the first planning proposal. His habit of glancing at Jeong-o throughout the day naturally faded away. In the meantime, time flowed smoothly.

“Daddy! Do you know what day it is the day after tomorrow?”

“Hmm? What day is it?”

Despite knowing the answer, Ji-heon playfully asked.

“It’s Christmas!”

Christmas was approaching. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, and the day after was Christmas.

Before their marriage, Jeong-o had mentioned something.

“The most important days for Ye-na are her birthday, Children’s Day, and Christmas. Kids live for the joy of waiting, so never forget these days. Got it?”

Ji-heon had etched those words into his memory.

To have a joyful Christmas Eve and Christmas, there were many things to prepare.

He had to finish the first planning proposal by the 24th to stay on schedule. However, gathering opinions was not easy. The staff had their own tasks and could only meet after regular working hours.

Advertisers tend to obsess over persuasion. Even if the gathered opinions were the result of painstaking efforts, if someone within the company raised an objection, they would have to start all over again. They had a

compulsion that if they couldn’t persuade someone internally, how could they possibly persuade anyone outside the company?

Thus, Ji-heon struggled. Especially when young interns from the planning side, who weren’t afraid to voice their opinions, made him revise his arguments.

He couldn’t be angry at the interns. In the lead-up to Christmas, those who devoted themselves to the company were precious individuals.

And before long, it was the 24th. Time to leave work.

“Director, I don’t understand this part.”

“I feel the same way. A 15% satisfaction rate doesn’t seem significant.”

At the interns’ earnest opinions, Ji-heon helplessly crossed out a line in the proposal.

“Okay. Let’s think about it again…”

As he gazed at the time passing indifferently, the whites of Ji-heon’s eyes reddened. He felt like his heart was burning.

But he couldn’t leave these young people behind and go home.

“By the way, Sun-il and Se-woong, aren’t you guys leaving for Christmas Eve?”

Despite Ji-heon’s serious concern, the passionate young interns answered cheerfully.

“I don’t have a girlfriend or any plans, so I’m fine with working hard for the company.”

“I’m meeting some friends at 10 PM, so I’ll work hard until then.”

…With young people like this, the company’s future was bright. But Ji-heon’s future felt dark.

Ji-heon felt like he was in a fog.

10 PM… So does that mean I have to be stuck here with these young people until then?

Today is Christmas Eve!

I have a family. My daughter must be waiting anxiously for her dad.

Taking advantage of the interns' break as they snacked, Ji-heon briefly stepped out of the conference room to contact Jeong-o. It was 7 PM.

"What are you doing?"

[I'm just playing with Ye-na. Since Dad isn't home, we can't go anywhere and are just playing at home. It's a cozy Christmas Eve.]

Ji-heon's heart felt like it was being torn apart by Jeong-o's reply. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

[No, it's okay. This is just how our jobs are.]

"But if Ye-na calls for me right now, I would go immediately."

[Oh, come on. Are you trying to offload your work onto the interns? That won't do.]

"I'm not offloading it; I can just take it home and finish it there."

[That won't work! You need to keep incorporating the employees' opinions. The interns are giving their precious time for you.]

Yet, strangely, there was not a hint of sympathy in Jeong-o's voice.

No, it almost felt like she was encouraging Ji-heon to work late.

"Is Ye-na really not sad that I'm not there?"

[Not at all. She’s still laughing and playing.]

A soft giggle from Ye-na could be heard faintly in the background. She was truly playing and laughing.

Why? Why? Why? Why is she okay without me?

[It’s fine, I’m here, so you finish what you’re doing. You need to complete your work so that others can do their follow-up tasks.]

“…”

[It’s okay. You didn’t even remember Ye-na’s birthday, so this is nothing.]

The piercing truth of her words made Ji-heon close his eyes tightly for a moment.

May 27th. The story of Ye-na’s birthday…

On that day, consumed by unnecessary misunderstandings and jealousy, Ji-heon had forgotten all about Ye-na’s birthday and had insisted on keeping Jeong-o by his side by piling up work. He had flatly refused Jeong-o’s pleas to take her work home and kept her at the office until nearly 9 PM.

That was Ji-heon’s dark past.

Now, he felt he was finally being punished for it.

Jeong-o teased him.

[It’s Christmas, not Ye-na’s birthday, and it’s Jesus’s birthday, so it’s understandable. Everyone will understand, especially our good Ye-na.]

Ahhh, this is driving me crazy!

Ch171 - [Side Story] Working Dad (3)

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Even though his wife abruptly hung up, Ji-heon couldn’t give up. He put his thinking cap on and headed to the department store.

The department store was near the office, so it didn’t take long.

“Did you wait?”

“Ah, Director!”

The two interns, who had been comfortably chatting in the conference room, straightened their backs as Ji-heon returned. They couldn’t help but feel nervous in front of their boss.

They really didn’t need to work so hard while feeling so tense. On Christmas Eve, no less.

Ji-heon thought he should send them home quickly and placed what he had bought from the department store on the table.

“It’s a cake. I bought the most expensive one from the store. You both seem to have worked hard, so I thought I’d bring some Christmas cheer.”

“Wow… Thank you!”

“Thank you, Director.”

The interns were genuinely touched, just as Ji-heon had expected.

“Oh, but what should I do… I think I picked the wrong cake. It’s an ice cream cake.”

“…”

“I need to put it in the home freezer quickly before it melts.”

“Then let’s eat it here and keep working!”

However, it was not easy to dampen the interns’ enthusiasm. Ji-heon hesitated for a moment at their eager insistence but eventually replied.

“Take it home and eat it with your family. Think how proud your parents will be if you tell them you received a gift from the company.”

“Still, we have to work…”

“I understand your enthusiasm, but Christmas holidays should be spent with family. Your families will be waiting for you. Go home now.”

Young people, please listen to me.

If you go home, then I can go home too.

“I can finish up. It’s still just the first draft of the proposal, so there’s plenty of time later. Let’s review it and improve it afterwards.”

Despite Ji-heon’s continued persuasion, the interns seemed heavy-hearted and hesitated. Ji-heon approached them, tidied up their work area, and handed them the cake box himself.

“You both did well today. Thank you for the feedback.”

“… No, thank you, Director.”

“You interns are so thoughtful. I really appreciate it.”

The interns reluctantly got up from their seats, repeatedly expressing their gratitude for Ji-heon’s kindness.

After sending the interns home, Ji-heon hurriedly made his way home. The roads were congested, probably due to Christmas Eve. He felt anxious enough to want to abandon his car and run the rest of the way.

Finally arriving at the apartment parking lot after about 50 minutes, Ji-heon couldn't wait for the elevator to arrive and hurriedly took the stairs. He thought seven floors would be easy, but his breathing quickened and sweat broke out.

At last, he arrived home safely.

"Ye-na!"

Ji-heon shouted loudly as he opened the front door.

"Are you back?"

But the voice welcoming him was none other than his mother, Jang Young-mi. Ji-heon moved forward with a dazed expression.

"Daddy!"

Ye-na called for Ji-heon a bit late. Wearing a Santa hat, she was giggling as she placed antlers on Jae-gwang, who had become Rudolf with his red nose.

"You're back?"

Jae-gwang lifted his head and asked. His Rudolf nose sparkled like the bulbs on a Christmas tree. Ji-heon felt a mix of confusion and amusement at this silly sight, far from the dignity of a chairman.

"When did you arrive?"

"I came right after finishing my short shift. I heard you were polishing up your proposal on a day like today?"

"…"

“It’s always the ones who can’t work that make noise while others are having fun.”

“That’s right.”

Soon, Jeong-o, who had come closer, chimed in with Jae-gwang’s teasing, poking fun at Ji-heon. Ji-heon slowly blinked, feeling tears well up in his eyes.

So that’s why Ye-na was laughing so heartily.

So that’s why Jeong-o said it was okay. She must have had faith in him.

Ji-heon turned to his mother, Young-mi, and asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m making a scarf.”

Young-mi replied, awkwardly moving her knitting needles.

Guk-soon is good at cooking, and Jae-gwang has a talent for playing with kids, but Young-mi is clumsy at everything, which is why she hurriedly learned to knit. She was knitting scarves for the dolls, while listening to her granddaughter’s nagging.

“Grandma, you said the koala is yellow.”

“Oh, right. What do I do? I’m almost done making it.”

“Redo it. Hurry up.”

“Okay. But Grandma can’t see well. I need to look at it for a long time.”

“Then just take your time.”

“But you told me to hurry.”

Young-mi and Ye-na had grown quite close. Seeing his mother struggling with his granddaughter made Ji-heon smile.

As a family gathered together to celebrate Christmas, they had a modest party with the cake Ji-heon had brought. Jae-gwang and Young-mi played with Ye-na for a long time before leaving late at night.

Finally, at 10 PM, Ye-na forced her heavy eyelids open and said to Ji-heon, “Daddy, I’m not going to sleep tonight.”

“You have to sleep. Why not?”

“I’ll sleep after I see Santa Claus.”

“…”

“The older kids at the Go academy keep saying Santa Claus doesn’t exist. But he really does!”

“How do you know Santa Claus is real?”

“Because I got presents on Christmas.”

Ji-heon could easily guess who had been playing Santa Claus all this time.

“Still, you need to sleep. Santa Claus will come only when Ye-na is asleep.”

“What about taking a picture?”

“Why do you want to take a picture?”

“We said we would take a picture with Santa Claus!”

“Santa Claus is really fast, so it’s hard to take a picture.”

“Why is he fast?”

“He has to visit every child’s house in the world, so he must be super busy.”

“So he can’t take a picture?”

“Right. He can’t take one.”

Ye-na’s eyes started to glisten with tears at Ji-heon’s answer. Seeing his daughter’s sulking expression made Ji-heon’s heart ache.

“… Instead, I’ll take a picture for you. Ye-na, hurry and sleep.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Really.”

“Then it’s a promise!”

There was no way to protect his daughter’s innocence.

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Jeong-o and Guk-soon hurriedly got Ji-heon dressed up.

“You have a Santa hat, and since we’re taking pictures focused on your upper body, let’s wrap this red cloth around you to make it look like a Santa suit. The pictures should be a bit blurry, like they were taken in a hurry.”

“Attach some cotton to your face, Jeong-seobang. You need to cover your face with the beard.”

The two of them were quite serious. Ji-heon couldn’t help but wonder if Jeong-o and Guk-soon were in cahoots with Ye-na to play a prank on him.

Anyway, he awkwardly took on the appearance of Santa Claus.

Jeong-o turned off all the lights in the room and handed Ji-heon the presents they had prepared.

“Just put these in front of the tree. I’ll take the picture.”

Ji-heon placed the gifts in front of the Christmas tree in the living room, following Jeong-o’s instructions.

Click, click, click!

“Good job! Well done!”

The photographer, Jeong-o, clapped and cheered.

Ji-heon sighed in relief and removed the beard.

The pictures turned out to be quite decent. Only his broad back and the cottony beard could be seen, so no one would recognize it was Ji-heon.

Even though he had been overwhelmed with work at the company, the ending turned out great. Merry Christmas!

However, the night was not over yet.

Drrr. Ji-heon’s phone rang. To his surprise, it was Seung-kyu.

Ji-heon quickly answered, wondering if something serious had happened.

“Hello?”

[Dear Santa?] Contrary to Ji-heon’s worries, Seung-kyu’s voice was cheerful. Ji-heon narrowed his eyes and glared at Jeong-o. Jeong-o, feeling guilty, stealthily shifted to the opposite side.

“Did you call to tease me?”

[No, can you come to my house for a bit?] “Why? Is something wrong?”

[Please come to our house and take just one commemorative photo, Santa!] “…… I’m hanging up.”

[Come on, buddy! I’ll respect you from now on!] “Hang up.”

Ji-heon hung up the phone without hesitation and turned to Jeong-o.

“Did you tell Seung-kyu I’m dressed as Santa?”

“No, I just sent him a picture because he was worried about Dobin. I’m sorry!”

Ji-heon couldn’t finish his sentence before grabbing Jeong-o, who was trying to run away.

“Where do you think you’re going? You’re coming with me.”

“…….”

“You go first.”

Ji-heon’s sternness finally led Jeong-o to set out with him.

Following Seung-kyu’s request, Ji-heon dressed up as Santa and placed gifts beside the sleeping Dobin and Doyun.

Click. A wonderfully realistic photo was taken. Seung-kyu and Jin-seo were very pleased.

After completing the mission, Ji-heon grumbled a bit.

“Make sure to tell the kids that there won’t be a Santa Claus next year. Why do I have to suffer while he gets all the credit?”

“Come on. You have to protect their innocence.”

Seung-kyu replied playfully.

“I’ll do it next year. Thank you so much, buddy.”

“Thank you very much, Ji-heon.”

Hearing the couple’s gratitude made Ji-heon feel a bit better.

Now, truly, Merry Christmas!

It was a happy Christmas for everyone.

On the way back home after parting with Seung-kyu and his wife, Jeong-o spotted a star in the sky and exclaimed, “Oh! You can see the stars tonight!”

Before Ji-heon could respond, his phone vibrated with a message. When he checked the screen and kept a neutral expression, Jeong-o asked, “Who is it at this hour?”

“Curious?”

“Of course I am.”

At her words, Ji-heon’s earlier resentment began to melt away.

He had felt hurt by his wife’s coldness.

Why is it that she smiles and talks sweetly to his mother and even to Go-eun-joo, but is so cold to him?

Why doesn’t Jeong-o show interest in him? He felt like he only had her.

Seeing his wife, who seemed to have no possessiveness unlike him, made Ji-heon’s heart twist with jealousy.

“I’m just an easy-going guy. Your words can cheer me up so quickly.”

“An intern is thanking me. I listen to her opinions well.”

“Oh. The intern sends you texts too?”

“Even though I look like this, I’m someone who is respected.”

Ji-heon lifted his chin proudly.

Glancing at the southern sky, he noticed several stars, just as Jeong-o had said. He pointed to the brightest one.

“That’s Sirius. It’s the brightest star you can see from here.”

Ji-heon explained, having studied stars in his spare time to answer any questions Ye-na might have about them.

“Sirius is about 8 light-years away from Earth.”

This meant that the light from Sirius takes about 8 years to reach Earth.

Jeong-o immediately asked, “So the star we’re seeing now is the view from around 8 years ago?”

“Exactly.”

“Then from that star, you can see Earth as it was 8 years ago?”

“Right.”

Ji-heon’s eyes sparkled as he answered. It felt like the stars had descended.

“Eight years ago was just before we met. So, from that star, you could witness our history.”

“Exactly. It would have been able to watch Ye-na grow up from the very beginning.”

Ah…

The calm tone of his voice felt strangely heavy.

The memory of something precious lost made his life feel tender. It seemed like the husband would carry that star in his heart for a lifetime.

Jeong-o replied cheerfully, lifting the subdued mood. “Then our husband could see the times when he was goofing off at work!”

“What good would it do to watch me goof off at work?”

Ji-heon said this as if he had nothing to show for his past, but Jeong-o had a different perspective.

It’s not just you who missed out on us.

I also lost you back then. I can’t see the you from that time, and I feel sad about it too.

I’m sorry too. I’m sorry as much as I love you.

Jeong-o took Ji-heon’s hand, gently comforting him.

As Ji-heon tried to put her hand into his pocket, his phone vibrated again.

Seung-kyu had just sent the photo they took. Ji-heon’s eyes lit up as he examined the photo and started shaking with laughter.

Jeong-o recognized the picture and couldn’t help but laugh.

“One day, Ye-na will realize that the person in this photo is her dad. And she’ll become an even happier person.”

Dear Ji-heon,

Time always feels fleeting, but as time passes, good things will surely come.

Ch172 - [Side Story] Working Dad (4)

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After a happy Christmas, it was time for weekend work again. Although it was a precious end of the year, everyone was preoccupied with preparing for the competitive presentation.

Especially Ji-heon, who was also busy with year-end report preparations, felt like he could use another body. Meanwhile, the date for the competitive presentation was moved up.

“Director, I just spoke with the person in charge of the ‘I-Pum’ project, and they have regrettably decided to change the competition presentation date to the 31st.”

Upon hearing the planning team leader’s report, Ji-heon’s brow furrowed slightly.

“December 31st?”

“Yes.”

That meant this Friday.

“What was the reason for the change?”

“They said it was due to the CEO’s schedule.”

Ji-heon sighed in resignation. Although he couldn’t be cheerful about it, he wasn’t too surprised either. This had happened two years ago, so he had

somewhat anticipated this possibility.

Ji-heon immediately called for the team in charge of the competitive presentation.

“The ‘I-Pum’ competition presentation for ‘Your Baby’ has been moved up a week. It will be this Friday afternoon.”

The shocking news caused everyone gathered in the meeting room to gasp in unison. Jeong-o seemed to be the most taken aback.

Ji-heon felt worried as he saw the color drain from Jeong-o’s face. However, he couldn’t rush over to her with so many eyes waiting for him to sort things out.

“I found out that ‘I-Pum’ also moved their competition presentation date up a week two years ago. It seems like they want to test how well the agency can perform in an emergency situation.”

Adding this explanation helped Ji-heon think more rationally.

Since the date was moved up, they would have one less week of stress. Moreover, the tight schedule applied not only to them but also to other competitors. If the other companies were struggling, it could be an opportunity for them.

He steadied himself and realized they could proceed calmly.

After all, he would be the one presenting the proposal, which would lighten the burden on the other team members.

“I don’t particularly like this situation, but I don’t think we can give up either. What about the production team?”

In response to Ji-heon’s positive outlook, Team Leader Seong Mi-ran quickly answered.

“It’s rough, but the first draft of the creative proposal is complete. I was preparing to report it tomorrow.”

“Let’s review it this evening. You can prepare the production materials as sketches. Team Leader Kim, please create a new schedule and share it with everyone.”

Once the tasks were organized, Ji-heon immediately turned to Jeong-o.

“Are you okay, Jeong-o?”

“Yes. We have to do it.”

Although her complexion was still pale, it seemed like his wife was determined to overcome the challenge. Relieved, Ji-heon also spoke to Eun-joo, who was sitting next to Jeong-o.

“What about you, Go Eun-joo?”

Eun-joo’s eyes widened at the unexpected question.

Oh, you sly director.

Why ask me how I’m doing when you could just check on Jeong-o? What did I do to deserve this, sitting next to her?

Eun-joo hesitated to answer.

“Uh, well… I’m okay. When has an advertiser ever scheduled a date based on the agency’s circumstances?”

Ji-heon nodded at Eun-joo’s calm response.

It was clearly a contrast to Jeong-o’s reaction.

Eun-joo thought Ji-heon was being absurd and felt a bit bitter, but she hid her wry smile.

Right. He’s wearing the mask of a working director, but underneath, he’s still just Jeong-o’s shadow. That won’t ever change.

“Exactly. Although we have little time to think, I believe it’s a good opportunity for intuitive ideas to come forth. Instead, we’ll make sure the proposal aligns completely with the production materials. Now, let’s all do our best.”

Unaware that Eun-joo was secretly laughing at him, Ji-heon wrapped up the meeting confidently and left the room.

***

As the competitive presentation approached, everyone was caught up in an incredibly busy daily routine.

The change in schedule unexpectedly revitalized the team members. If the date had been postponed, they would have felt despondent thinking about the extended struggle, but with it moved up, their labor would be shortened.

While success would be great, it was better for the company’s perspective to have a shorter period of hard work since failure was also a possibility.

With time running short, the team members quickly gathered their opinions without the luxury of disputes, and the results started piling up.

Thus came December 31, D-Day.

The presentation team from Max Planning departed directly for the I-Pum headquarters after a rehearsal. Today’s attendees included Ji-heon, the planning team leader, Deputy Manager Park Young-gwang, Jeong-o, and Assistant Manager Go Eun-joo.

As expected, the client showed the most interest in Ji-heon, who was present. Especially, the CEO of I-Pum recognized Ji-heon immediately.

“Aren’t you the child of Chairman Jeong Jae-gwang?”

“Yes, that’s correct. I’m Jeong Ji-heon, the head of the first division at Max Planning.”

“I see that Max Planning is taking great care of our I-Pum. It’s an honor to have you here today.”

In response to the I-Pum CEO’s courtesy, Ji-heon replied politely.

“It’s an honor for me to be presenting today.”

Everyone present seemed surprised by Ji-heon’s answer.

“You will be presenting yourself?”

“Yes, I’ll be in charge of the planning section.”

They had thought of him as just someone there to fill a seat.

However, just the fact that Ji-heon was presenting wouldn’t be enough to persuade the clients. Their reactions were divided into two: some looked on favorably, while others had a hostile glare.

“Well, shall we begin?”

Amidst the prejudiced gazes, the presentation commenced. Ji-heon stood up to present the advertising campaign planning section.

As it had been in the rehearsal, Ji-heon’s presentation was flawless. The process leading up to the campaign theme was seamless and clear in its essence.

It wasn’t particularly flashy, but it was a polished presentation. The preconceived notions about the chairman’s son had been neatly dispelled.

Then it was Jeong-o’s turn.

“Hello. I’m Lee Jeong-o, a copywriter from Max Planning.”

Jeong-o stood up carefully, cradling her belly with one hand.

One of the client executives, having observed this closely, spoke up.

“If you don’t mind me asking, are you…?”

“Yes. I’m five months pregnant.”

Jeong-o answered eagerly, pushing her belly forward as if to emphasize her point.

She was trying to create familiarity by pointing out that she was an expectant mother.

Advertisements

Reading Jeong-o’s clever strategy, Ji-heon forgot his role for a moment and smiled. His heart fluttered.

So cute. So incredibly cute.

His fingers itched to reach out and caress his wife’s cheek.

Jeong-o began her presentation naturally.

“As a mother of one and while waiting for my soon-to-be-born baby, preparing for this ‘Your Baby’ campaign has been especially meaningful for me. I was able to deeply research the product and brand from the perspective of the core target audience.”

What started as a very personal approach expanded gradually under Jeong-o’s calm voice, concluding with a focus on promoting the product while instilling pride in the client.

“Good job.”

Ji-heon exchanged a glance with Jeong-o as she sat down, sending her a silent message. During their preparation, they had playfully argued over who was doing better, but in the end, they were on the same team.

After the media strategy presentation was completed, questions from the advertisers followed.

“The concept of a sturdy and safe brand is good. However, if the perception sets in that it’s a product that’s fine to use for ten years, won’t the sales of new products gradually decline? I doubt people would want to buy new ones if they can just pass them down. We need to continuously develop and sell new products next year and the year after.”

After the sharp question, the clients turned to Ji-heon as if they had made a silent agreement. The conference room fell silent.

Without hesitation, Ji-heon spoke up.

“If ‘Your Baby’ develops upgraded versions every year and implements effective advertising strategies, the customer base will continue to grow. This is why many companies persist in brand advertising. Moreover, the desire of parents to buy new and the best for their children doesn’t change over time. By tapping into this psychology, I am confident that ‘Your Baby’ advertising will leave a deep impression on consumers, promising another decade ten years from now.”

Ji-heon’s answer, which reinforced Max Planning’s campaign strategy along with his foundational arguments, surprised the I-Pum employees. They were taken aback by Ji-heon’s unexpected performance.

They thought he had only prepared to show off, but he had genuinely put in serious effort.

Realizing this, the CEO was greatly pleased.

“Another decade ten years from now… That sounds good. If our brand lasts over ten years, we might be able to run an ad looking toward another decade.”

“That will happen. Please stay with Max Planning until then.”

The CEO chuckled heartily at Ji-heon’s almost joking wish.

“Thank you, Director Jeong Ji-heon.”

The presentation concluded on a high note.

Two hours later, their efforts bore the fruit of success.

“We did it!”

As soon as the planning team received the call from the client, the team leader ran to the production team and shouted loudly.

“Yay!” Everyone jumped up from their seats and cheered. The intern had tears in her eyes.

December 31st. The perfect conclusion to close out the year. The team congratulated each other.

Eun-joo spoke to Jeong-o.

“Assistant Manager, you worked hard.”

“You too, Assistant Manager Go.”

“What did I do? This presentation was all thanks to the husband-and-wife duo.”

Wiping away her tears, the intern chimed in, asking about Ji-heon.

“How was it? Director, you did a great job presenting, right?”

“If I did well, then we must have succeeded, right?”

Eun-joo calmly acknowledged this with a smile.

“To be honest, I didn’t expect you to be such a good presenter. I didn’t think you’d be able to retain all that extensive content in your head.”

Advertisements

At Eun-joo’s remark, Jeong-o held her breath and perked up her ears.

“Now that I think about it, our director always seems to do everything perfectly. But Assistant Manager, didn’t you say you were going to the

reading room?”

“I was going to go a bit later.”

Keep going! Please, tell me more!

She loved hearing her husband praised more than anything else in the world.

Jeong-o’s eyes sparkled as she paused her tasks to listen to Eun-joo’s words.

“Now that you’ve succeeded in marriage, I thought you might get a transfer to headquarters, but if you had just gone to headquarters, we might not have known how capable you are. Why were you hiding that from us?”

Our director. Hehe.

Hearing her husband praised in Eun-joo’s voice felt like an exaggeration, but it was entirely true.

Husband, you’ve been recognized!

Jeong-o’s shoulders slightly shook with joy.

That’s right. My husband does well when he’s given tasks. He’s really a great person, more than I expected.

Having received plenty of compliments about her husband, Jeong-o texted Ji-heon on her way to the reading room.

– I heard from Assistant Manager Go that you did a great job. Feeling good! ♥

Ji-heon quickly replied.

– They say I did well at my job?

– Yes!

– Then I can stay here, right?

The smile that had been lingering on her lips faded away.

“Is that why you worked so hard?”

Jeong Ji-heon was indeed a man with very clear goals.

Ch173 - [Side Story] The Children Are Growing Up (1)

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Feeling proud after wrapping up the day, the couple returned home.

Even though they had been busy with work and hadn’t paid much attention, their child was growing up fast. As they spent time laughing and marveling at the new expressions the child casually used, bedtime had arrived before they knew it.

After changing into her pajamas, Ye-na said, “Dad, I’m going to countdown at twelve o’clock.”

“Do you know what a countdown is?”

“Yep! It’s when you say 10, 9, 8, 7, and so on.”

“That happens late at night. But Ye-na has to go to bed at nine o’clock.”

“I’m not going to sleep today.”

After Christmas Eve, the energetic child seemed to have some sort of fantasy about staying up all night.

“Well, I wonder if Mom will allow it?”

“Dad, you tell Mom.”

“Hey, honey. Our daughter says she’s going to sleep at twelve o’clock?”

Ji-heon conveyed Ye-na’s position to Jeong-o. As expected, Jeong-o reacted unfavorably.

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to countdown! When the New Year chimes, I’ll bow to Mom and Dad!”

Ye-na was going to bow.

Ji-heon felt a twinge of excitement at the thought of receiving a bow from his daughter. Recognizing Ji-heon’s bright expression, Jeong-o suggested an alternative for Ye-na.

“It might be tough to stay awake until then. How about you take a nap first? I’ll wake you up.”

“Okay! Wake me up one minute before twelve. No, five minutes before!”

“But Ye-na doesn’t wake up easily when she’s asleep. Can I tickle her to wake her up?”

“No, no tickling.”

“Then how will you wake me up?”

“Yell in my ear.”

“What if I still don’t wake up when you yell in my ear? Can I pinch you?”

“Okay.”

“Don’t cry if it hurts.”

“Okay.”

Having reached a pleasant compromise with her mother, Ye-na went to bed happily.

So, five minutes before midnight, the crucial role of waking Ye-na fell to her dad.

“Princess Ye-na, it’s time to wake up. It’s five minutes until midnight.”

Ji-heon clearly remembered that Ye-na had said to yell in her ear.

How would she wake up if he whispered sweetly?

As expected, Ye-na did not move, and Ji-heon transitioned to the second step.

With his fingers pinched, Ji-heon approached Ye-na’s soft skin.

“Ye-na. Jeong Ye-na.”

From Jeong-o’s perspective, all she could do was sigh.

“Is that how you pinch? How do you expect her to wake up like that?”

Jeong-o pushed Ji-heon aside and sat in front of Ye-na.

“Wake up, Jeong Ye-na! We have to see the countdown!”

“Ugh….”

With a voice like a drill sergeant, Jeong-o gave Ye-na a little smack on the bottom, and only then did Ye-na respond. However, she still couldn’t get up.

She seemed unable to shake off her sleep, raising just her bottom towards the ceiling, looking as if she were bowing. It was utterly adorable, enough to melt anyone’s heart.

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At the same time,

Seung-kyu’s household was no different.

“Park Do-bin, it’s countdown time!”

“Ughhh.”

Seung-kyu raised his voice and shook Do-bin, but Do-bin could only moan and was slow to get up.

“It’s one minute until the New Year! Get up! You said you’d wake up!”

“We decided to watch this with Mom and Dad!”

“Park Do-bin, wake up!”

“Nooo. Don’t call me.”

Seung-kyu and Jin-seo teamed up to wake Do-bin, but he only grumbled in his sleep. Unable to take it any longer, Jin-seo resorted to her secret weapon.

“Park Do-bin, Ye-na is here. Wake up.”

“Hmm?”

Only then did Do-bin finally open his eyelids.

Meanwhile, time marched on.

Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! One!

Finally, the New Year had arrived.

“Yay! It’s the New Year! Happy New Year to our son! Congratulations on entering elementary school!”

Jin-seo joyfully hugged Do-bin and delivered her New Year’s greetings, but the boy still seemed dazed.

“Where’s Ye-na?”

“…She’s sleeping.”

It felt like starting the New Year with a defeat.

On the other hand, worries flooded in.

He was of age, and it was time to send him to school, but would he really be able to adjust to school life…?

With a heavy heart, Jin-seo welcomed the New Year.

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The world outside was cold, but inside the house was warm, and at the end of a short winter, the children graduated from kindergarten.

Ye-na, having to leave her friends after graduating from kindergarten and attending an elementary school far away, cried tears of sorrow even after the ceremony. Do-bin comforted her.

“Ye-na, don’t cry.”

“But you can keep meeting your friends at elementary school.”

“No, I don’t have friends. I’m not close with them.”

“……”

“I’m closest to you.”

“Still, we might be in different classes.”

The school that Ye-na and Do-bin would be entering had about 100 students enrolled each year, resulting in about four new classes. This meant that the chances of Ye-na and Do-bin being in the same class were 25%.

From that moment on, Do-bin also began to feel anxious.

“Mom, has the announcement come out yet?”

Do-bin constantly nagged Jin-seo about it.

The class assignments for first graders were announced in the last week of February on the school’s website. Jin-seo, equally curious about the class assignments, visited the school’s website every time her son asked.

By this time, Jin-seo was nine months pregnant and her body felt heavy. Even when she was pregnant with her second child, her belly had grown quickly, but with the third, it seemed to swell even faster, making it look like her due date had already passed.

This made moving around uncomfortable. Sitting at the computer for even a simple task became a bit of a challenge each time Do-bin pressed her.

“Mom, has the announcement come out yet?”

“Park Do-bin, I checked just 30 minutes ago.”

“It could have come out in that time.”

Sigh.

Although she sighed, he wasn’t wrong. With love for her son, Jin-seo sat back down at the computer.

“Oh, the announcement is out!”

Indeed, within those 30 minutes, a notice had been posted on the school’s website. Jin-seo became the third parent to check the class assignment notice. After downloading and opening the attached document, she found several pages listing the names of the children.

“What is this?”

Do-bin wrinkled his nose as he looked at the document. The children’s names were partially redacted for privacy, and Do-bin’s name appeared as Park ○-bin.

“Do-bin is in Class 1.”

Jin-seo kindly pointed out her son’s name.

“Wow! I’m in Class 1? Does that mean I’m Park Do-bin?”

“Yeah. And….”

After checking her son’s name, Jin-seo quickly moved her gaze. She could also see Ye-na’s name nearby.

“Our Do-bin is lucky.”

“Why?”

“Because both you and Ye-na are in Class 1.”

“Where? Where does it say that?”

As Do-bin leaned closer to the monitor, Jin-seo pointed out Ye-na’s name for him.

– Jeong ○-na, Guardian Jeong ○-heon

Ye-na’s and Ji-heon’s names were written side by side with the middle letters redacted. Jin-seo thought of Ji-heon for a moment. Ye-na’s dad must feel so touched.

“Is this Ye-na?”

“Yeah. The middle letter is redacted. Her dad’s name is right next to it, so it’s definitely true that Ye-na is in Class 1.”

“Ye-na is in Class 1, and I’m in Class 1?”

“Right.”

“Wow! I’m number one!”

Do-bin raised his arms high and shouted excitedly as he jumped around.

No, no, son. It’s not number one; it’s Class 1……

Still, it was a relief that he was such a positive child, but the thought of sending such an oblivious young one off to elementary school made Jin-seo feel increasingly anxious.

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As afternoon approached, it was time for them to go to the academy.

Since last year, Ye-na had started attending an art academy, and she had become much better at abstract painting. Even during portrait painting sessions, it seemed that Ye-na was the only one painting abstract art, but Jeong-o decided to take a long view of things.

Ji-heon, despite not being able to draw well, had once received an award after great effort, and Jin-seo recalled this story from her mother-in-law, Yeong-mi.

“Ye-na, hurry up! We’re meeting Do-bin.”

“Okay. But Mom, I got a text from Unnie Sae-bom.”

Ye-na stood in one place, looking at her phone.

“Oh really? What does it say?”

“Sae-bom Unnie also moved to our apartment.”

“Really?”

Ye-na handed her the phone. On the screen was the name of Sae-bom, a second grader she had met at last year’s Go tournament.

– Hi Ye-na! You said you live in the ○○ Apartment, right? I moved here today!

After reading the text, Jeong-o looked out the window. It was February, the season for moving, and she could see several moving trucks. Since Sae-bom mentioned that she moved today, one of those trucks must belong to her family.

“I should go see her later!”

Jeong-o felt excited all of a sudden. Whenever Ye-na talked about Sae-bom, a smile bloomed on her face. It seemed that both Sae-bom and her mom were nice people, and Jeong-o was eager to greet them since their connection was now renewed.

With an excited heart, Jeong-o left the house with Ye-na.

“Ye-na!”

Before they knew it, Do-bin had reached Ye-na’s apartment complex and ran over to her happily. They had planned to meet in front of Do-bin’s house since Jin-seo was feeling heavy, but it looked like Do-bin had come out a bit earlier.

“Park Do-bin!”

“Ye-na, we’re in the same class!”

The children immediately grabbed each other’s hands and began a lively game of “Ganggangsullae.” Ye-na was thrilled to be in the same class as Do-bin.

While watching the children’s boisterous reunion, Jeong-o greeted Jin-seo.

“Sister, I’m sorry for coming out late.”

“It’s okay. Do-bin was so excited after the class assignments were announced… he was singing about wanting to see Ye-na quickly, so we came out early. But there are a lot of moving trucks here?”

“Yeah, there seem to be a lot of moves today.”

As Jeong-o and Jin-seo chatted, Ye-na's phone rang. It was Sae-bom.

"Hello."

Ye-na immediately answered the call. However, the response came from outside the phone.

"Ye-na!"

Sae-bom ran over from a short distance, calling out Ye-na's name. Ye-na also shouted when she saw her.

"Oh? It's Unnie Sae-bom! Unnie!"

Do-bin's face, which had been blooming like cherry blossoms in spring, suddenly froze.

"I recognized you from over there!"

Sae-bom approached, and next to her was a boy around the same age as her.

"Hello, Sae-bom. This is Ye-na's mom."

"Hi, I'm Kang Sae-bom, and this is my younger brother, Kang Sae-byeol."

"Oh? Kang Sae-byeol!"

Ye-na quickly recognized Sae-byeol. He was also a friend she had met at the Go tournament. In August of last year, Sae-byeol had been Ye-na's first opponent in her very first Go competition.

"Hi, Ye-na."

Sae-byeol greeted her with a shy yet happy expression, glad that Ye-na recognized him.

Jeong-o asked, "Do you and Sae-byeol know each other?"

"Yeah! We met at the Go tournament."

At Ye-na’s reply, a storm swirled in Do-bin’s eyes.

Oblivious to Do-bin’s unease, Ye-na asked Sae-byeol.

“So you’re attending ○○ Elementary School too?”

“Yeah. What class are you in?”

“I’m in Class 1. What about you?”

“Wow! I’m also in Class 1!”

Sae-byeol’s face, which had just moments ago shown a shy expression, blossomed brightly. It felt as if Do-bin’s blooming cherry blossoms had been stolen away.

“Kang Sae-byeol, you made a friend right after moving!”

Sae-bom said playfully, nudging her brother.

Do-bin couldn’t smile at all.

He had overlooked an important fact amid his joy of becoming an elementary student and being in the same class as Ye-na.

Becoming an elementary student meant that the world was widening.

Not only his world but also Ye-na’s.

And… it meant he had a rival.

Ch174 - [Side Story] The Children Grow Up (2)

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Do-bin glared at the rolling stone. But strangely… he felt his eyes narrow upward.

Oh my gosh. The kid named Kang Sae-byeol or something seemed to have fingers two sizes bigger than his own.

What did he eat to grow so big?

No one paid attention to Do-bin's darkening expression.

Sae-bom asked Ye-na, "Where are you going?"

"To the academy."

"Oh, you go to a Go academy! We should move to the same academy as you!"

"We should move to the Go academy! That would be great if we could all go together!"

Hearing the conversation between the two kids, Jeong-o responded cheerfully.

Do-bin felt his vision clouding over. But then…

"You're both learning Go? That's great! Our Do-bin goes to the same Go academy, so you can all be friends!"

Even his mother, who he trusted!

Do-bin felt his heart tighten as Jin-seo welcomed the rolling stones.

They say there’s no one to trust in this world!

In the midst of various worries and concerns, time passed, and the children’s elementary school entrance ceremony was just a day away.

Do-bin was no longer excited about the entrance ceremony.

The rolling stones, Kang Sae-bom and Kang Sae-byeol, registered at the Go academy yesterday. Sae-byeol begged her mom to enroll her in the art academy like Ye-na. Despite Do-bin glaring at Sae-byeol with a fierce look, it was useless.

“Ye-na, are you okay? My little sister can’t draw at all.”

Sae-bom expressed her concern, but Ye-na answered nonchalantly.

“I can’t draw either. It’s okay.”

Not even able to draw!

They both liked Go and couldn’t draw. Jeong Ye-na and Kang Sae-byeol had too much in common. Meanwhile, I like Ye-na, like Ye-na, like Ye-na…

My eight-year life filled with only Jeong Ye-na was heavy with worry. The thought that one day Sae-byeol would invade the art academy made me want to cry.

Jin-seo had no energy left to consider Do-bin’s feelings, lost in her own worries.

“Isn’t it possible that the baby could come out at any time?”

Though there was still quite some time until the due date, her belly was noticeably large. With her slender frame and a protruding belly, she looked precarious. While they had scheduled an induced labor for Friday with the doctor, it wouldn't be surprising if the baby came out before then.

"I hope it comes out after tomorrow. I just want the entrance ceremony to go smoothly."

Seung-kyu reassured his worried wife.

"You don't have to go to the entrance ceremony. Ye-na's mom will be there too."

But Seung-kyu's suggestion did nothing to comfort Jin-seo.

"No way. It's Do-bin's first day of school; I have to watch it properly. How can I leave this troublemaker to Ye-na's mom? Ye-na's mom is already heavy too."

"Don't put too much pressure on yourself. What does it matter if you don't watch it?"

"What if something happens while I'm not watching?"

"Oh, come on."

"Don't say 'come on'!"

In the meantime, Do-bin had opened the fridge, poured some milk into a cup, and took a sip before putting it back down.

"Do you know how many things there are to teach? It's not easy raising a kid. There's still so much to teach."

Jin-seo, silently watching, let out a bitter sigh and picked up the cup that Do-bin had put down. Her hand moved swiftly as she wiped the circular milk stain left on the table.

“How many times do I have to teach him how to pour milk and put the cup down? He doesn’t get it with just one lesson! Park Do-bin! What did I say to do after you drank the milk?!”

Jin-seo raised her voice at the retreating figure of Do-bin.

“You’re turning eight tomorrow, and you haven’t changed at all!”

“Mom hasn’t changed either! How long has it been since you turned a year older?!”

Even though her voice rose from the repeated failures to correct his habits, the child had only learned to raise his voice instead of actually learning. Plus, with his head getting bigger, he had become quite the smart aleck. It seemed like he was secretly attending a school for cheekiness behind his mother’s back.

Pfft.

Meanwhile, her husband was secretly laughing.

“Did you just laugh?”

“Uh…? No.”

“You laughed while I was angry?”

“No, no.”

Seung-kyu stealthily moved to Do-bin’s room.

“Son.”

Seung-kyu lay down beside his son, who was staring blankly at the ceiling. Today, Do-bin seemed especially on edge.

Could it be that his mind is unsettled because the stage of his life is changing? As he gently comforted his son, Do-bin subtly complained.

“Dad, time goes by really fast.”

“Hmm?”

“Do-bin isn’t growing, but time is flying by.”

“……”

“I’m jealous of time.”

……Is our son already going through puberty?

Seung-kyu blinked in surprise at his son’s sudden sentimentality.

***

The next day, it was the children’s elementary school entrance day.

Along with Jeong-o, Jin-seo, and Guk-soon, the fathers sending their first child to school, Ji-heon and Seung-kyu, also walked to school together.

“Park Do-bin!”

Do-bin, who had left home feeling gloomy, brightened up immediately at Ye-na’s voice calling his name. The two children held hands and walked happily toward school.

The auditorium was bustling with first-grade kids and their parents. Soon, an announcement instructed everyone to sit by their respective classes. The children lined up in the provided chairs.

Ye-na and Do-bin sat side by side in front of the Class 1 sign.

“Ye-na, Do-bin!”

Sae-byeol, who was in the same class, called out to them from behind.

“Hi, Sae-byeol!”

Seeing Ye-na greet her with a bright smile made Do-bin feel gloomy again.

The child's world was widening.

Today was also a day of overwhelming emotion for Jeong-o.

The baby who used to cry no matter how much she soothed and comforted him had grown, running around, talking, and making friends; now, he had become a student. Because of the child, the mother and father had also become parents.

Now the child would gradually be able to do more things on their own. And the mother, who once cheered and celebrated everything, would eventually feel lonely.

Seeing the child, who she had once felt proud of for accomplishing things on her own, now venturing far beyond her reach, she would inevitably feel a pang of sadness. Although she didn't need to feel that way yet, Jeong-o found herself imagining that day repeatedly.

With tears welling in her eyes, Jeong-o glanced beside her. Ji-heon's nose was also red. It was a moment of heartfelt emotion for her husband as well. He couldn't have witnessed all of the child's days, making it all the more poignant.

A normal day for all eight-year-olds. Yet, also a very special day.

But there was one mother who couldn't fully relish this feeling.

"I think I'm feeling something… or maybe not…"

Today, Jin-seo, with her ambiguous contractions, only deepened her worries. Even though this was her third childbirth, she still couldn't tell. All she knew was that she had to endure somehow. She thought that she couldn't cause a commotion during the entrance ceremony, which was meant for the first graders.

After the entrance ceremony, the children moved to their classrooms. The parents who sent their kids to class received information about the parent-

teacher association and left the school. After successfully watching the entrance ceremony, Jin-seo sent Seung-kyu to work and went home.

The problem arose around the time the children were supposed to come home. Jin-seo, dragging her heavy body to the school, suddenly felt sharp labor pains.

“Are you okay, unni? You don’t look so well.”

Jeong-o, who had also come to pick up her child, noticed Jin-seo’s pale complexion and asked. Jin-seo felt so burdened that she could hardly respond to the question.

“Do-bin’s mom! Are you okay? Don’t you need to go to the hospital?”

Sae-byeol’s mom, who had met her a few days ago, rushed over to support Jin-seo. Jin-seo nodded weakly, drenched in cold sweat.

Both Ji-heon and Seung-kyu were at work, unable to take Jin-seo to the hospital. Jeong-o, who was also heavy with her own pregnancy, was likely unable to take care of Jin-seo. Even if she contacted Seung-kyu now, it would take time for him to get back from work, leaving only Sae-byeol’s mom to act.

“Ye-na’s mom, could you watch over Do-bin and Sae-byeol? I’ll take Do-bin’s mom to the hospital.”

With Sae-byeol’s mom’s quick thinking, the chaotic situation was immediately organized. Jeong-o contacted Seung-kyu, and Jin-seo and Sae-byeol’s mom quickly hailed a taxi and left.

About ten minutes later, the first-grade kids rushed out after finishing their classes.

“Ye-na! Do-bin! Sae-byeol! Over here!”

Jeong-o waved her hands toward the children.

“Mommy!”

Ye-na spotted Jeong-o and ran over. As expected, Do-bin and Sae-byeol were left without their mothers and looked ready to cry. Do-bin asked first.

“Auntie, where’s our mom?”

“She went to the hospital. Sae-byeol’s mom went with Do-bin’s mom.”

“Why? Is Mom sick?”

“It seems it’s time for the baby to be born. Your grandmother is coming from the countryside, so when she arrives, you can go home with her.”

“……”

“Sae-byeol’s mom will take Do-bin’s mom to the hospital and come back right away.”

Do-bin’s face turned pale at the thought that while Sae-byeol’s mom would return, his own mom wouldn’t.

“It’s okay, Do-bin. Mom is fine. Don’t worry.”

Jeong-o hugged Do-bin tightly to comfort him.

Jeong-o took the children home. Sae-byeol’s eyes widened in amazement as she visited Ye-na’s house for the first time.

“Wow! This is the first time I’ve been in such a big house!”

“Yeah! And there’s a second floor too.”

Ye-na excitedly showed Sae-byeol around the house. While the two girls joyfully ran around inside, Do-bin remained sulky. He trudged after them with heavy steps, but then Ye-na suddenly brought out a Go board.

“Shall we play Go?”

“Sure!”

Sae-byeol cheered, but Do-bin couldn’t join in.

“No, I want to play ‘al-kka-gi’ (a traditional Korean game similar to marbles).”

“Then let’s play Go and al-kka-gi!”

Ye-na tried to persuade Do-bin, but he wouldn’t budge.

“I can’t play Go. I want to play al-kka-gi.”

“Okay, let’s play al-kka-gi then.”

Sae-byeol stepped up first. In the end, they decided to play al-kka-gi.

Ye-na and Do-bin’s match ended in a draw.

Ye-na and Sae-byeol’s match resulted in Sae-byeol’s victory.

Finally, in the match between Do-bin and Sae-byeol, Sae-byeol effortlessly pushed all five of Do-bin’s marbles away, and Ye-na looked up at Sae-byeol in surprise.

“Wow! You’re really good at al-kka-gi!”

“Let’s play again.”

Do-bin, unable to accept defeat, challenged Sae-byeol to another round, but Ye-na, losing interest in al-kka-gi, suggested a different game.

“We’ve played al-kka-gi once, so let’s play house! I’ll be the mom!”

“I’ll be the dad!”

Sae-byeol quickly chimed in, responding to Ye-na’s request.

A quake of anxiety crossed Do-bin’s eyes. How dare that Kang Sae-byeol threaten my position as dad!

“Why are you the dad? I’ll be the dad. You can be the baby.”

“No way! I said I’d be the dad first.”

As Do-bin insisted, Sae-byeol retorted as if she couldn’t lose. Ye-na, sensing the tension, suggested another game.

“Let’s not play house and draw pictures instead!”

“Yeah! Let’s draw!”

Once again, Sae-byeol readily agreed to Ye-na’s suggestion. So the three children gathered together to draw.

However, this time, Do-bin became greedy. He kept snatching the color crayons that Sae-byeol wanted to use. Before long, the crayons had piled up only next to Do-bin.

Ye-na intervened again.

“Park Do-bin, don’t take all the crayons.”

“I’m going to use this one first.”

“But this is mine. We should share nicely.”

Yet, Do-bin only returned a few colors. He tightly held onto the sky blue crayon that Sae-byeol urgently needed and absolutely refused to give it up.

As Do-bin grew greedy with his crayons, Ye-na became angry.

“If you don’t want to share nicely, you should go home and get your own crayons.”

At her words, Do-bin felt a lump of sadness in his throat.

Jeong Ye-na. You’re all I have. How could you do this to me?

Anger seeped out from Do-bin’s nostrils like steam.

“Is being pretty all that matters?”

That was the first time Do-bin had gotten angry at Ye-na.

Ye-na couldn’t help but feel hurt by Do-bin’s reaction. With tears welling in her eyes, she replied in a choked voice.

“Did I want to be pretty to be pretty?”

Ch175 - [Side Story] Children Grow Up (3)

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Hearing Do-bin and Ye-na’s voices, Jeong-o rushed over.

“Beautiful kids. What’s going on? What happened?”

“Mom, Park Do-bin got angry!”

Ye-na ran to Jeong-o, hugging her as she spoke. Sae-byeol chimed in.

“While we were drawing, Do-bin took all the crayons. When Ye-na wouldn’t let him, Do-bin got angry.”

Waaah!

Do-bin, who had been frozen in sadness, finally burst into tears. Cold sweat dripped from Jeong-o’s forehead.

“Ye-na, you can’t do that when you invited a friend over. Do-bin, auntie will give you one of Do-bin’s crayons. Don’t cry.”

Jeong-o held Do-bin in her arms, soothing him.

Before long, Do-bin’s maternal grandparents arrived. Jeong-o, having visited Do-bin’s grandparents before, welcomed them warmly.

“You arrived early.”

“Yeah. This morning, the child slowly said he was feeling sick. I thought today might be the day, so I left right away. When I called Do-bin’s dad earlier, he said they were in the delivery room.”

A baby was going to be born today! Jeong-o felt a bit anxious as well.

“Is Ye-na’s grandma here?”

“She went to her academy.”

“She still looks great.”

While Jeong-o and Do-bin’s grandmother exchanged greetings, Do-bin ran over, sniffing.

“Grandma! Waaaah…”

The lingering sadness exploded in front of his grandmother. Jeong-o explained the situation, flustered.

“The kids got into a fight… I’m sorry. They’re usually very good friends, but I think Ye-na was a bit sensitive today.”

“Do-bin must have felt the same way. Kids fight as they grow, so you don’t have to apologize.”

Do-bin’s grandmother hugged him tightly, comforting him.

“Do-bin, let’s go home.”

Waaaah. No! I can’t go home leaving Jeong Ye-na and Kang Sae-byeol behind!

Do-bin expressed his feelings through his tears, but his grandmother couldn’t understand him.

“Do-bin, we’ll go see the baby when your little sibling is born, but are you going to keep crying like this?”

While his grandmother continued to comfort him, Sae-byeol's mom also arrived at Jeong-o's house. Only then did Do-bin stop crying. They all exchanged greetings, and the kids awkwardly parted ways.

After greeting the guests, Jeong-o let out a sigh of relief and wiped the cold sweat from her forehead.

Finally, she noticed her daughter, whose lips were jutting out like a duck's bill.

"Ye-na, why did you suddenly fight with Do-bin after getting along so well?"

"Park Do-bin is a fool."

"Jeong Ye-na, you shouldn't call your friend a fool."

"But he really is a fool! Park Do-bin is mean."

Ye-na spilled all the events from the house to Jeong-o. While listening to Ye-na's story, Jeong-o realized something new: Sae-byeol also liked Ye-na, which made Do-bin jealous…

The child's honest words made Jeong-o feel both good and worried.

"Park Do-bin got angry and asked me if being pretty is all that matters."

"Hmm?"

"He asked, 'Is being pretty all that matters?' That's why we fought."

Then, Ye-na shared a cute story with a serious expression, leaving Jeong-o a bit puzzled.

That's strange. Do kids fight over things like this these days?

"So, did Ye-na feel bad?"

Recalling how she felt at that moment, Ye-na blinked her eyes and suddenly dropped a tear.

“When Do-bin said I was pretty, it felt nice, but he got mad at me for something I liked, so it made me angry…”

So that’s what hurt her.

Jeong-o hugged Ye-na.

If a child only hears good things from friends, she might feel hurt. At the same time, Jeong-o was also worried that Do-bin must have been hurt as well.

“Did you feel hurt because Do-bin got angry?”

Ye-na nodded.

“Do you know how grateful you should be for Do-bin always telling you that you’re pretty? It’s because our Ye-na is pretty, but also because Do-bin’s heart is kind.”

Waaah. Jeong-o wiped away the little cries as she persuaded her.

“It doesn’t feel good to fight with friends, right?”

Ye-na nodded.

“Then you should make up, right?”

Instead of answering, Ye-na clung to Jeong-o’s neck, hugging her tightly. Jeong-o gently rubbed Ye-na’s back.

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After four hours of labor, the baby was born. It was a healthy baby weighing 3.2 kg. As the loud cries filled the hospital room, Jin-seo felt a mix of fear and anticipation for the future.

In the evening, Jin-seo's parents came to visit along with Do-bin and Do-yoon. Do-yoon was fascinated by seeing his little sister, but Do-bin didn't look cheerful. Wondering if he was upset about having another younger sister when one was already enough, she subtly asked, but Do-bin just shook his head.

"I heard you fought with Ye-na."

Do-bin's grandmother answered instead. Jin-seo turned to Do-bin.

"Really? You fought with Ye-na? What happened?"

"Ye-na only plays with Kang Sae-byeol and not with me."

Do-bin replied sulkily, pouting.

Hearing this, his grandmother intervened.

"Why are you fighting over something like that?"

"……."

"You're in elementary school now, so you shouldn't just play with Ye-na. You should also play with other kids. Play with the boys, and make friends with other girls too."

"You don't know anything, Grandma."

Do-bin shot back rudely at his grandmother's suggestion and slumped against the wall, hugging his knees.

Nobody in this world understands my feelings.

That's how my feelings drift away.

I don't even know where the path of my feelings starts and ends.

So, I can't stop it.

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Ye-na went to her academy holding a bag of candies her grandfather had given her long ago.

But neither Do-bin nor Sae-byeol showed up at the academy. Even though Sae-byeol was at the Go academy, Ye-na still felt strangely empty. In art class, it was no different; she didn’t find much joy in drawing.

After finishing her academy classes, Ye-na returned home and started munching on candies by herself.

“Princess Ye-na, Daddy’s home!”

Ji-heon returned from work and happily called out to the child, but Ye-na looked at him with weary eyes before turning her head away.

Noticing Ye-na’s mood, Ji-heon quietly approached Jeong-o and asked with a glance. Jeong-o recounted what had happened earlier that day.

At the end of her story, she added her observations from watching them.

“Sae-byeol seems to like Ye-na, too.”

“Oh… really?”

“Yeah.”

“Why do I want to cry?”

“Right? I feel good too.”

“No, that’s not it. It’s the opposite.”

Ji-heon felt like crying because his daughter was so beautiful. But he couldn’t blame Jeong-o for giving birth to such a pretty girl.

Seeing Ji-heon’s serious expression, Jeong-o playfully smiled and went over to Ye-na. But as soon as she approached, the voice raised.

“Jeong Ye-na!”

Startled by her mother’s excited voice, Ye-na bit down harder on the candy.

“Did you eat all of this already?”

Jeong-o shook the nearly empty candy bag at Ye-na, scolding her.

How many times had this happened? No matter how much she talked, Ye-na didn’t seem to understand, but today Jeong-o decided she would have to give a stern warning.

“If Do-bin isn’t here, you should have saved the candy to give to him tomorrow! How can you eat it all yourself?”

But the scolding couldn’t continue. Ye-na had blood pooling in her mouth.

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Ji-heon, Jeong-o, and Ye-na hurried to a dental clinic that was open for evening appointments.

It turned out that there were not one, but two wobbly teeth. Blood was flowing from both front teeth, making her mouth even messier.

“We’ll have to pull both of them.”

At the doctor’s suggestion, Ye-na turned pale with fear. However, before she could struggle and run away, one tooth was quickly pulled out. It had already been so loose that there was little effort required for the extraction.

“I figured that would happen. Eating all that candy makes your teeth wobble like that.”

During the procedure, Jeong-o commented. Ye-na, looking like she was about to cry, surrendered the remaining tooth to the doctor while making a whimpering sound.

The kind doctor quickly finished extracting the teeth.

“All done! Doesn’t that feel refreshing?”

“Really?”

Ye-na asked, her pronunciation a bit off.

Ye-na’s cuteness decreased by 20%.

Ye-na’s adorableness increased by 10%.

Seeing this, Jeong-o couldn’t help but laugh.

“Ye-na has become a little silly!”

With her front teeth gone, Ye-na looked like a house with its door wide open. The new appearance was so cute that Jeong-o couldn’t help but express her feelings, but Ye-na, who always wanted to be seen as pretty by her mother, was disappointed.

“Waaah! Why?!”

Ji-heon quickly comforted her.

“Now that your baby teeth have fallen out, adult teeth will grow in their place. You have to take care of those adult teeth. They won’t grow back again, okay?”

“Waaah…”

Although Ye-na felt a bit hurt by her mother calling her silly, Ji-heon’s comforting words made her quickly wipe away her tears.

With the baby teeth gone, adult teeth would grow in their place. That thought sounded pretty cool to Ye-na. Though she hadn’t grown much taller yet, she felt a bit more mature.

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The next morning.

While Mom and Dad were at the hospital, Grandma helped Do-bin get ready for school. Since Grandma was much slower than Mom, Do-bin arrived at his classroom just as class was starting.

Do-bin's seat was in the back row of the first section, which allowed him to see the entire classroom. Naturally, he could see Ye-na, who sat in the front row of the third section.

However, all he could see from his seat was the back of Ye-na's head. He couldn't help but envy Sae-byeol, who sat in the front row of the first section and could see Ye-na's profile.

As he placed his bag on his desk and stared at Ye-na, their eyes suddenly met when she turned her head.

His heart raced, and the muscles around his mouth twitched.

But contrary to Do-bin's expectations, Ye-na tightly closed her lips and turned her head away again without saying a word.

He had hoped she would greet him first, allowing him to act as if everything was fine and reply cheerfully, but he felt utterly disappointed.

Do-bin couldn't bring himself to say hello either due to his pride.

Throughout the first class, Do-bin couldn't focus on what the teacher was saying. No, as he stared at the back of Ye-na's head, time slipped away. It wasn't until the first class ended and the kids began to move that Do-bin snapped back to reality.

Ye-na seemed to be heading to the bathroom. As Ye-na walked out of the classroom, Do-bin shuffled along behind her. However, before he could get close, Sae-byeol stepped in between them.

"Ye-na! Let's go to the academy together with my sister today. She wants to play a game with you."

"Okay."

Hearing their friendly conversation made Do-bin feel upset again. But just as he turned away, feeling dejected…

“Did you lose your front teeth? Huh? Both of them are gone.”

At Sae-byeol’s voice, Do-bin stopped in his tracks.

Ye-na lost her front teeth? Both of them?

He wanted to see it so badly.

However, watching them talk without realizing he was close made him feel irritated again.

“Is it weird?” Ye-na asked Sae-byeol.

Yes, it’s weird. It’s really not good. Hmph.

Ye-na is silly and really not good.

“No. They all fall out. Mom told me mine will, too.”

Sae-byeol answered Ye-na’s question. However, that wasn’t the answer Ye-na was hoping for. Without asking Sae-byeol anything further, she turned her head away.

“Park Do-bin.”

Ye-na called Do-bin’s name.

Do-bin flinched, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Is it weird that I lost my teeth?”

It felt strange to see his friend, who looked somewhat incomplete with missing front teeth. But it didn’t mean that her pretty face had become ugly.

Ye-na quickly closed her mouth again, as if embarrassed to show her missing teeth. Depending on Do-bin’s response, it seemed like she might

cry. Like a mirror, Do-bin mirrored her expression.

Do-bin didn’t want the friend he loved most in the world to feel down just because of a few missing teeth. If Ye-na felt sad, he thought he would feel sad too.

“No, it’s not weird.”

“…”

“It’s not weird, but pretty. Of course.”

You’re the prettiest.

Even if all your teeth fell out, you would still be the prettiest in the world.

At Do-bin’s response, a bright smile returned to Ye-na’s face. Her radiant smile, unbothered by her missing teeth, was truly beautiful, like a flower.

Finally, Do-bin smiled back at Ye-na, just like always.

The flow of feelings couldn’t be stopped.

Ch176 - [Side Story] The Birth of No. 2

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In the warm spring, it was a perfect season for children to play.

The child who had started elementary school gradually adjusted to the new life. From the moment they woke up in the morning until they fell asleep at night, they played continuously, yet they were also learning within that play.

For Ji-heon, this was his first spring with the child. He packed for the child's first picnic, planted trees with the child, admired the cherry blossoms that filled their apartment complex, and before he knew it, May was fast approaching.

It was time to welcome a new family member.

Next to Jeong-o and Ji-heon's bedroom, a baby room had been created. The main contributors to decorating the baby room were Ye-na and Young-mi.

Young-mi visited Jeong-o's house every week to help Ye-na decorate the baby room. Naturally, the room was filled with Ye-na's preferences. Ye-na would make requests, and Young-mi would bring them to life.

Since learning to knit at Christmas, Young-mi's skills had grown significantly. Ye-na's requests had become increasingly challenging, pushing Young-mi to improve naturally. Under the demands of her strict teacher, Ye-na, Young-mi began making clothes for various dolls and eventually started crafting dolls herself.

“Grandma, you said you’d make a small rabbit doll since Sim-kung is smaller than Ye-na. What if the Ye-na doll and Sim-kung doll are the same size?”

“I can only make them this size for now.”

“If you try, you can do it.”

“Okay. I guess I need to try harder. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. You can do well from now on. Let’s make it again soon.”

“Do you want me to make this again?”

“Since you made a mistake, you have to do it again.”

Jeong-o, overhearing their conversation from a distance, couldn’t help but smile. No one would know that Ye-na’s words sounded just like those of Ji-heon, the director of Max Planning, when he spoke to his employees.

Young-mi, oblivious to this fact, didn’t complain even when Ye-na nagged her. She merely admired how well her granddaughter spoke.

In any case, she felt proud to be able to decorate her grandchild’s room with the things she made. Being active kept her healthy. Jeong-o was the one who had been taking care of Young-mi’s health, both in the past and now.

With the quilt, mobile, and dolls made by Grandma, along with many gifts from acquaintances, the baby room soon became colorful. Ye-na eagerly anticipated the arrival of her baby sibling, visiting the room every day to see her preferences reflected in it.

As the due date approached, and despite the baby being larger than average, Jeong-o didn’t worry much.

Unlike with her first child, many people around her were taking care of things, and they adjusted to her condition, which gave her strength. Most importantly, she felt reassured by the fact that her husband was there.

On the other hand, Ji-heon had become a bit sensitive. His sensitivity arose from trying to take good care of Jeong-o.

“Why do your hands look pale? Isn’t that a sign of labor starting?”

“Labor? Not yet.”

“Still, I’m worried. Should I skip work today?”

“You have to go. You’re the department head.”

“What if you suddenly go into labor? I’ll have to take you to the hospital.”

“Then you can just rush to the hospital. I can get there on my own. Mom is here, so it’s okay.”

“But your mom has to take care of Ye-na.”

“Are you just trying to avoid going to work?”

Jeong-o hit the nail on the head.

At Jeong-o’s question, Ji-heon looked at her quietly, like a gentle baby animal, without denying it.

Since Jeong-o had taken maternity leave at the end of April, there was no point for Ji-heon to continue working. The person he needed to protect was at home, not at the office, so Ji-heon’s thoughts were consumed by home all day.

“Go to work quickly. Since I’m not there, you have to work hard for both of us.”

“Sigh… I don’t want to go.”

Ji-heon let out a deep sigh, not hiding his feelings at all.

“Sim-kung, don’t be a troublemaker and stay still. Daddy will finish work quickly and come back soon.”

“Don’t say you’ll do it roughly!”

As Ji-heon jokingly spoke to Jeong-o’s belly, she snapped back. The child found his dad’s jokes amusing and kicked his mother’s belly a few times. Ji-heon could see the belly jiggling from the strength of the kicks.

With her husband reluctant to go to work and sending the child off to school, the house finally felt quiet. Jeong-o spent a peaceful time sitting next to Guk-soon in the living room.

Watching Jeong-o’s belly move subtly, Guk-soon said, “I wonder which little troublemaker is about to come out, giving Mom no time to rest.”

“It’s just hiccups.”

Jeong-o confidently answered, feeling the baby’s rhythmic movements. While it was hard to feel them when moving around, she could clearly sense the baby’s kicks while sitting still.

“Today, the hiccups are lasting a bit longer, which is concerning. Sim-kung, stop the hiccups now.”

Jeong-o said this with her head bent down toward the baby. At that moment, she felt a sudden sensation inside her.

“Ah…”

“What’s wrong?”

Jeong-o’s pale face answered Guk-soon’s question instead.

Guk-soon quickly prepared Jeong-o and called Ji-heon.

“Yes, Mother.”

“Hey, Jeong-seobang, I think I need to go to the hospital. My water seems to have broken.”

“Where are you now?”

“I’m about to take a taxi to the hospital.”

“I’ll be there right away. It’ll take 10 minutes.”

Ji-heon truly arrived home in less than 10 minutes, surprising Jeong-o.

“How did you get here in 9 minutes? Did you skip work?”

“…”

“Why can’t you speak? Did you really not go to work?”

“I went. I stopped by the office, went to a meeting, and came straight back. These days, I schedule meetings around here.”

You scheduled a meeting nearby?

Despite her panic, Jeong-o sighed in disbelief.

Anyway, thanks to her husband, who prioritized her above everything else, Jeong-o quickly arrived at the hospital.

After changing clothes and undergoing various tests in the family delivery room, afternoon had already arrived, and the contractions gradually grew stronger.

Though the contractions continued, the baby hadn’t descended at all, making it seem like it would take a long time. Jeong-o curled up and lay down, sniffling.

“I’m scared…”

Ji-heon comforted Jeong-o, who was feeling frightened. He, too, felt inexplicably anxious and couldn’t remember the encouraging words he had prepared, but he steeled himself. He needed to be a supportive husband for his wife.

“It’s okay. You’ll be fine.”

“I’m scared I won’t have the strength because I’m hungry…”

“…Huh?”

“I should have eaten more before coming…”

Ji-heon felt a bit relieved by Jeong-o’s regretful complaint.

“Sim-kung, you have to come out today. You can’t come out tomorrow…”

Even in her weakened state, Jeong-o continued to mutter.

“If you’re going to come out tomorrow, it’s better to wait until the day after tomorrow…”

“You can’t wait until the day after tomorrow. Prolonged labor is dangerous. You need to come out by tomorrow morning at the latest.”

A nurse who had come to check on Jeong-o replied to her mutterings. Jeong-o shook her head at the nurse’s advice.

“No, I can’t come out tomorrow morning…”

“…”

“Sim-kung, just come out quickly today, please… Tomorrow is Parents’ Day…”

Hehe.

At that moment, a small laugh escaped Ji-heon, and he hurriedly covered his mouth. His wife was so cute and lovely, trying to take care of things even while in pain. But he thought that if he revealed his true feelings, he might receive double the reproach, so he maintained a serious expression.

There was no time to laugh. The contractions became closer together, and Jeong-o’s grip on Ji-heon’s hand tightened.

Jeong-o’s short nails left deep marks and bruises on Ji-heon’s hand. But neither Ji-heon nor Jeong-o could feel it.

“Hah, hah…”

Jeong-o’s breathing grew increasingly labored. Ji-heon stayed by her side, breathing with her according to the breathing techniques he had learned.

Now the intensity of the contractions was easily reaching 100. Watching his wife tremble and groan, Ji-heon felt tears welling up in his eyes. He felt a deep sense of guilt thinking about how his wife had suffered like this seven years ago when he couldn’t be there.

Still, they managed to reduce the pain with an epidural, although it ultimately became useless in the end.

Time flew by in a daze, and soon the baby began to descend, and the cervix opened. The Avengers team came in, transforming the bed into a delivery bed, and then the doctor arrived, and the process sped up.

Seeing Jeong-o in such pain, Ji-heon felt a surge of confusion as well. He wanted to rush over to wipe Jeong-o’s face and hold her hand, but the husband wasn’t much needed in the delivery process.

While the Avengers team supported Jeong-o in pushing, Ji-heon stood quietly at the back, only feeling anxious.

“Mom, please give me strength. If you don’t push now, the baby will be in danger.”

The baby will be in danger?

Jeong-o, who had seemed to faint momentarily from exertion, opened her eyes wide as if she had taken a stamina-boosting potion at the doctor’s advice. She pushed with renewed vigor.

“I can see the head. Let’s push a little more. One, two!”

Everyone put in their strength in rhythm with the doctor’s call. And then…

“The baby is here! It’s a boy!”

A baby, with stiff arms and legs stretched out, came into the world.

At first, the baby didn’t cry right away. It wasn’t until the nurses massaged the baby’s limbs and the doctor used a tool to help the baby breathe that the sound of the baby’s cries filled the delivery room.

Ji-heon, standing a step away in a daze, awkwardly walked over when the nurse called him to cut the baby’s umbilical cord. After that, while the doctor took care of the post-delivery procedures and the nurses washed the baby, Ji-heon wiped the forehead of Jeong-o, who was blinking in exhaustion.

It felt like something was caught in his throat; he had trouble speaking.

“You did a great job.”

“Even you’re crying, oppa.”

Jeong-o, gazing quietly, smiled weakly. Ji-heon didn’t even realize tears were streaming down his face. After quickly wiping away his tears, a nurse came over, cradling the baby. The baby cried loudly, turning bright red.

“It’s 4.0 kg.”

…So that’s why Jeong-o had such a hard time…

The baby seemed chubby and fluffy, but Ji-heon wasn’t mistaken; the baby was much larger than expected.

May 7, 10 PM. A healthy baby weighing 4.0 kg is born!

Ji-heon gently held the baby, whose face resembled his own, as he felt an odd familiarity. The dark hair on the bright red forehead made him smile through his tears.

A child who looks like me.

A thrill started in his chest and shook his entire body.

The moment he fell in love. The moment he couldn’t help but fall in love.

“Sim-kung, hello. It’s Daddy.”

From the moment he first met Jeong-o eight years ago to this moment, through countless days of separation and reunion until they became a family, it felt like all those days rushed by behind the baby.

And so, another fate had arrived.

As if remembering the voice heard in his mother’s womb, the baby stopped crying in his father’s arms.

Ch177 - [Side Story] Kids Grow Up Too Fast (1)

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In Class 1-1, it was time for the end-of-class announcements.

“Everyone, make sure to wake up early tomorrow and give the letters and carnations you made today to your parents, okay?”

“Okay!”

“And you have to listen to your mom and dad.”

“Yes!”

The teacher’s reminders were met with enthusiastic replies from the kids.

Yena carefully placed the letter and the carnation she made during class into her textbook and packed it into her bag. The thought of how happy her mom and dad would be to receive the carnations made her very excited.

“I’m back!”

“Did you come home, my puppy?”

Yena, returning home with a bright smile, froze at the quiet atmosphere in the house. The only person who welcomed her was her grandmother. Her mom was not there.

“Grandma, where’s Mom?”

“Yena, your mom went to the hospital to have your little sibling.”

“Why did she go so early? She said the baby would come out next week.”

“No one knows when the baby will come. Our Yena was born a month early, you know.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? Maybe she was eager to see her mom’s face.”

Her grandmother replied with a gentle smile, but Yena couldn’t smile like her grandmother.

“So the baby is out?”

“Not yet. It’s going to take some time.”

“Then will it come out by dinner?”

“We still don’t know. It could come out sooner or take much longer.”

Yena grew anxious at her grandmother’s vague answer.

After returning from the academy, having dinner, and playing around while watching TV, Yena occasionally felt gloomy.

“Grandma, why aren’t Mom and Dad here?”

“The baby hasn’t come out yet.”

“Why isn’t Sim-kung coming out?”

“Good question.”

“Then Mom and Dad aren’t coming today?”

“They’ll be at the hospital for a few days. Your mom needs to rest after giving birth.”

Last April, when Jeong-o said she would take a break from work, Yena was overjoyed.

Though she didn’t show it, she had envied her friends Do-bin and Saebyeol, whose mothers greeted them after school and spent all day with them.

She had been so happy that she didn’t think much about the fact that a little sibling would be born someday. Even while decorating the sibling’s room and saying she had been waiting for the baby to arrive, she didn’t really grasp what it meant.

Yena asked with a downcast expression, “Then what about Dad?”

“Dad needs to take care of your mom.”

“And what about me?”

“Our puppy will be taken care of by Grandma.”

I’d rather have Dad take care of me than Grandma.

Yena pouted and turned away.

An hour later, tired from waiting, Yena changed into her pajamas and came back, asking tearfully, “I have to go to bed now, but why hasn’t Mom called?”

“The baby hasn’t come out yet. Your mom is probably too tired to call.”

“What about Dad? He shouldn’t be tired.”

“Dad is busy taking care of your tired mom.”

Yena’s eyes filled with tears. She looked hurt, as if she couldn’t believe Dad might forget her, and Kuksun felt a pang of affection.

“Let’s sleep with Grandma tonight. Grandma will hold you.”

Holding Yena’s hand, Kuksun went to the room and laid down bedding on the floor.

As Yena lay down in her grandmother’s arms, she spoke after a while.

“Grandma, when Sim-kung comes out, I’m going to scold him.”

“Why would you scold your little sibling?”

“Because he’s making Mom suffer so much. Tomorrow is Parents’ Day.”

“…”

“The teacher said we should give our moms and dads carnations in the morning. But because of Sim-kung, I won’t be able to see Mom and Dad tomorrow morning.”

Tomorrow is an Important Day for Yena Too

It would be Yena’s first Parents’ Day with her mom and dad after not having her dad around for seven years.

A child who is loved thinks of giving just as special as receiving. Yena had probably imagined her parents’ happy faces upon seeing the flowers she made, and Kuksun felt a pang in her heart thinking about how disappointed she would be if she had to abandon those expectations.

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The next morning.

After finally getting the third child, Dohee, to sleep in the late morning after crying all night, Jinseo sighed heavily at the sticky mess on the kitchen counter.

There was also a bundle of wet wipes that hadn’t been thrown away yet, and a single empty yogurt bottle in the trash can.

The culprit was all too obvious. In trying to carry out a perfect crime, Do-bin had made things even more troublesome.

“Park Do-bin! Come here!”

Jinseo shouted, unsure of where Do-bin was. She couldn’t yell too loudly, worried that Dohee might wake up.

Do-bin approached with a bright smile, seemingly unbothered about getting scolded.

“Why are you drinking yogurt instead of eating breakfast? And why did you spill it here?”

“Mom bought yogurt, so…”

“If Mom hadn’t bought yogurt, I wouldn’t have spilled it!”

“Ugh. How can I win against you?”

As Jinseo picked up a rag to clean the sticky floor, Do-bin suddenly held something out to her. Jinseo raised her eyebrows and asked curiously.

“What’s this?”

“A letter! I wrote it!”

“You wrote a letter? Park Do-bin?”

“Yep!”

Wondering what this was about, Jinseo opened the letter with a somewhat indifferent expression.

– Dear Mother, thank you for giving birth to me. But next time, please give me a little brother. Thank you. Father, thank you for earning money and playing with me. Happy Parents’ Day.

The letter awkwardly ended with “Happy Parents’ Day.”

Was it so hard to add just one more “yo,” my son?

Seeing her child proudly present an unfinished letter was so amusing that Jinseo couldn’t help but laugh. In truth, she felt a sense of gratitude too.

Now I also receive congratulations on Parents’ Day.

Would he adapt well to school? Would he continue to get into trouble? She had worried endlessly about her son, but surprisingly, he was gradually growing up.

He was still a troublemaker who secretly drank yogurt, spilled it in the kitchen, and couldn’t clean up properly, but he was growing up just like a typical eight-year-old—brave and strong.

“Park Do-bin, what trouble did you cause this time?”

Seung-kyu approached as he noticed Jinseo’s expressive face.

Without answering, Do-bin hurried to the room and returned with a paper flower.

“Dad, look at this!”

A bright red paper flower that looked like a presidential medal. Seung-kyu flinched at the sight.

“It’s a carnation. I made it. Hurry and pin it here.”

Do-bin urged as he pointed to Seung-kyu’s left chest.

“…Okay. Thank you, my son.”

“Hurry and pin it.”

“Alright. Is that good?”

Seung-kyu pinned the flower to his shirt with a clip on the back and showed it to Do-bin.

“Oh, no, no.”

Do-bin shook his head and went to get Seung-kyu’s suit jacket, which was resting on the living room sofa.

“It needs to be pinned here.”

Without a word, Seung-kyu pinned the paper flower to the jacket.

“Dad, you have to keep it on at work too. I’m going to video call later. Got it?”

“…Sure.”

A punishment disguised as a gift.

Seung-kyu suddenly thought of his own father after a long time. When he was little, he had made paper carnations like this too. On Parents’ Day morning, he had pinned a flower to his father’s chest.

His father had gone to work happily with the flower pinned on. However, when he returned home, the flower was gone. He had secretly felt sad about that, but now he felt he could understand his father’s situation. People can only understand as much as they have experienced.

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“Yena!”

Arriving Early at School

Do-bin, who arrived at school early, ran straight to Yena as soon as she got there.

“Did you pin a flower on Mom and Dad?”

Yena didn’t look very happy.

“No. Mom and Dad didn’t come home yesterday.”

“Why?”

“They went to have the baby.”

“Oh, then they won’t be home today either?”

Having experienced the arrival of a sibling last March, Do-bin understood immediately.

“Was the baby born?”

“Yeah, yesterday.”

“Then did they come back from the hospital?”

“No, they’ll be back after school later.”

“Why? I went to see my baby sibling on the day they were born.”

“They said I have to go to school.”

Tears welled up in Yena’s eyes. She looked very sad, so Do-bin quickly changed the subject.

“Congratulations on getting a little sibling. I bet they’ll be cute.”

“No. Not at all. Want to see?”

Wiping her tears, Yena took out her phone from her bag and showed him a photo. It was a baby wrapped in a green blanket, looking like a cocoon. It was a picture she received from her dad that morning.

As Do-bin looked closely at the photo, Yena asked, “Doesn’t it remind you of something?”

“What does it remind me of?”

“It looks like the cabbage we saw in Grandma’s yard last year.”

Yena, unable to look at her sibling in a positive light, said with a pout, “Right?”

“Really?”

“Yeah. So I told Grandma to name it Cabbage.”

“Cabbage? Then it’ll be Jung Cabbage?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s funny, Jung Cabbage.”

Do-bin giggled. Yena felt better seeing Do-bin’s reaction.

“Then people will tease your little sibling. Every time they eat kimchi, they’ll say, ‘Hey, Jung Cabbage, don’t eat kimchi!’”

But when Do-bin predicted what would happen later, Yena’s smile faded. It was okay for her to tease her sibling, but she didn’t think she would feel good if others did it.

As if reading her thoughts, Do-bin offered another perspective.

“I think it looks prettier than cabbage.”

“……”

“Look at it again. Isn’t it prettier than cabbage?”

“…… A little.”

“Yeah. And since I’ve had two younger siblings, I know that after a few nights, they get cuter. This one will be like that too.”

“Had two?”

Do-bin’s words sounded a little strange, but somehow Yena felt that he seemed more mature than ever. She reflected for a moment on how she had

insulted her sibling. She decided not to be spiteful any longer and to welcome the sibling who would soon become prettier.

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After school, Yena went straight to the hospital with Kuksun.

She was excited in many ways. Excited to see her sibling. And excited to give her flowers and letter to her mom and dad.

“Princess Yena!”

Jiheon was waiting in the hospital lobby.

“Dad!”

Yena ran to Jiheon and hugged him. Jiheon lifted Yena high into the air and asked,

“Yena, were you sad that I didn’t come yesterday?”

The baby was born after Yena fell asleep last night. Jiheon called Kuksun in the middle of the night to share the news, and Kuksun had told him that Yena was feeling very sad.

“Yeah. You didn’t even call.”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t contact you because I was busy watching over Mom since she was in pain. Can you understand, Yena?”

“Yeah.”

Yena nodded bravely. If Dad said he was sorry, she could certainly understand.

“What about the baby?”

“She’s in the room now. The nurse took her there.”

Yena’s heart raced at Jiheon’s response.

“You’ll be able to hold your little sibling too.”

“Really? Can I hold her?”

“Of course. Just be careful when you do.”

While the baby was in Mom’s belly, Yena had talked to her many times. She had encouraged the baby, saying, “Come out quickly so we can play together!” Now she could finally hold her sibling.

Yena’s steps quickened. She pulled on Kuksun and Jiheon’s arms as she hurried toward the hospital room. As they approached the door with her mom’s name on it, they could hear the baby crying loudly.

With a big smile on her face, Yena pushed the door open with all her might.

“Mom!”

“Princess Yena, you’re here?”

As Jiheon was soothing the second baby, he looked up and welcomed Yena.

However, Yena’s bright smile quickly faded.

Despite promising not to be spiteful any longer, seeing her mother holding and soothing the crying cabbage made her unable to say anything else.

“…Mom, put the baby down quickly.”

Yena’s voice wavered with unshed tears.

Ch178 - Children Grow Up Too Fast (2)

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Everyone paused at Yena’s reaction.

It was then that Jeong-oh realized the situation. The feelings of the first child with a new sibling were akin to those of a husband bringing home another woman. This was something he had heard from Jinseo before having their second child.

Additionally, there was something Kuksun had told him that morning: Yena was quite upset because her mom hadn’t called her.

Just before bringing the baby into the hospital room, Jeong-oh had reminded himself that he shouldn’t hurt Yena’s feelings, but as soon as the baby cried loudly, he forgot all about it.

“Uh-oh. Okay, I’ll put her down.”

Flustered, Jeong-oh quickly placed the baby back in the basket. The baby’s cries were still loud, making him anxious. He felt that he should hold her to stop the crying.

Fortunately, the mother understood her daughter’s anxious heart. Kuksun picked up the baby instead and soothed her. With Grandma holding her, the baby’s cries began to quiet down. Yena’s previously tense expression quickly softened.

“Princess Yena!”

Jeong-oh, who had been startled for a moment, opened his arms to call out to Yena. She ran to him and hugged her mom.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t contact you yesterday.”

As soon as her mom apologized, Yena could no longer stay mad.

“It’s okay. And Mom, I wrote this for you.”

“What is it?”

“A letter. Today is Parent’s Day, right?”

Parent’s Day. The exciting words made Jeong-oh’s face brighten. He opened the letter, and the neat, carefully pressed handwriting brought tears to his eyes.

– Mom, thank you for loving me. Dad, thank you for being Yena’s dad. I love you both.

“Mom, and this is a flower!”

Before Jeong-oh could read the letter again, Yena thrust a paper flower at him.

“Did you make this?”

“Yeah! I made it at school yesterday. Hurry, pin it on!”

Yena’s eyes sparkled with life as she saw her mom’s interest.

However, Jeong-oh hesitated to pin the paper flower to his chest. He worried that if he held the baby while wearing it, the flower’s rough edges might scratch her.

Unaware of his thoughts, Jiheon had already pinned his own paper flower to his chest, happily wearing what Yena had made for him.

Right. He couldn’t disappoint Yena.

Jeong-oh pinned the paper flower to his chest as well.

Seeing the carnations pinned to her mom and dad's chests, Yena smiled with satisfaction. She felt that she could now give love to her sibling too.

"Grandma, I want to hold the baby too."

"Does our little dog want to hold the sibling?"

Kuksun, pleased with Yena's enthusiastic response, sat her down. Yena received the baby from her grandmother.

"The baby can't hold up her head on her own yet, so you need to support her neck like this. Can you do that?"

With Kuksun's careful words and actions, Yena also became cautious. She held her breath, afraid of dropping the baby.

"How does it feel to hold your sibling?" Jiheon asked.

It took a while for Yena to answer.

"…It's warm."

"And?"

"It's fun."

"What's fun about it?"

"Watching her lips move like a fool."

The baby, who kept turning her head sideways and twitching her lips, looked amusing.

"Your sibling is looking for something to eat because she's hungry," Jiheon explained. Yena nodded, as if she understood. Seizing the opportunity,

Jiheon asked Yena for permission.

“Can the baby go to Mommy now? Can you let Yena hold her?”

“Yeah.”

With Jiheon’s help, Yena carefully stood up while holding the baby. The sibling, nestled in Yena’s arms, was then passed over to their mother. Watching her mom hold the baby tightly made Yena feel a little empty inside, but she felt more at ease than at first.

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Jeong-oh decided to do postpartum recovery at home. She thought it would be good to stay close to Yena so that the elementary school student wouldn’t feel neglected.

Thus, the serious task of caring for a newborn began immediately. However, while the intention was good, reality was far from the ideal.

Waaah!

Day and night, the second baby cried incessantly, waking Yena from her sleep and making her whimper.

“Mommy… it’s so noisy, I can’t sleep…”

“Did our Yena wake up? I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

As Jeong-oh cradled the baby and tried to calm her, she apologized to Yena. However, Yena only continued to pout more sadly. Jiheon held Yena’s hand.

“I’ll put you to sleep, let’s go.”

“No!”

Yena meant she wanted her mom to do it.

After the second child was born, Yena had become a bit spoiled again.

With no other choice, Jeong-oh set the crying baby down and took Yena's hand.

"Let's go to the room. Mommy will put you to sleep."

Caring for two children was exhausting. It was completely different from raising just one child. Moreover, the first child was in elementary school and would definitely remember all of this.

Jeong-oh had to do her best not to make her firstborn feel neglected. She became increasingly desperate in trying to be perfect. The fear that she wouldn't be a good mother to both children began to take hold.

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Jinseo's house was an even noisier battlefield.

However, Jinseo had settled her worries long ago and had given up on many things, so she felt more relaxed than Jeong-oh. Although she had become so relaxed that she couldn't keep track of her child's school life in a timely manner.

That morning, Jinseo quickly looked at the online bulletin board for Do-bin and called him over.

"Park Do-bin! You have a spelling test today, right? Why didn't you tell Mom?"

The online bulletin board had a message from the homeroom teacher stating that they would be testing ten out of the twenty sentences given last week. This was Park Do-bin's first test.

"Hmm? That?"

Do-bin responded as if it were someone else's business, nonchalantly.

"I don't have to study because I don't know what will come out."

"If you don't know what will come out, you have to try everything!"

He wouldn’t know if he didn’t at least try.

Since morning, Jinseo’s voice had been raised because of her son. After raising her voice, she quickly felt drained.

“I’ve been really diligent. My husband is also said to be dependable. Who does this kid take after? Is he really my son? Thoughts that she had pushed aside began to creep back into her mind.

“Park Do-bin, should I pull your hair?”

“Why pull my hair?”

As she thought about whether to really get a paternity test, her hand hovered over Do-bin’s head, and her heart ached.

What if, what if this kid isn’t really my son? If he’s not my son and needs to go back to his real family, could I really do that? I raised this child! He has grown up this much in my arms!

Feeling serious, Jinseo finally spoke heavily.

“…Do-bin, you know you were born in a big hospital, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, what if… what if when you were a newborn, you got switched with another baby at that hospital?”

“……”

“So, if right now, Mommy and Daddy are not your real parents, and you’ve been switched, then your real mom and dad are someone else?”

“Then where are they?”

“Huh?”

“My real mom and dad. Where do they live?”

“No, it’s not that they’re real, it’s just, what if.”

“Why are you talking about stuff like that?”

“So, if that were the case, would you go to your real mom and dad?”

“Can’t I go back and forth?”

“…Why?”

“If I get scolded there, I can come here, and if I get scolded here, I can go back there.”

“…”

“I can’t choose one.”

I expected him to cling to me saying, “Mommy, I want to be your son. I’ll listen to you from now on,” but my son was surprisingly realistic and rational. Instead, Jinseo was the one who was shocked.

Do-bin seemed a bit excited.

“Mom, can I tell Yena about this?”

“Tell her what?”

“That I have real mom and dad too.”

“No! I said it’s a ‘what if!’”

Seung-kyu, who had come closer, stifled a laugh at their conversation.

Suddenly serious, Do-bin tilted his head and asked Seung-kyu.

“Dad, did you see me coming out of Mom’s belly?”

Seung-kyu jokingly replied.

“Did I see it, or not… I don’t remember…”

“Then I’m not Dad’s son?”

“Maybe I bought you at the store? I can’t quite recall.”

“How much?”

“Uh… was it about a hundred thousand won?”

Jinseo could only roll her eyes at her husband’s playful teasing instead of comforting their child.

The fact that her son took this seriously shocked her even more.

“Wow! Then I could be sold for a million won! Wouldn’t that be great, Mom?”

“Why would I sell you!”

Jinseo felt her temper rise in response to her son and husband’s banter early in the morning.

“He really is your son. He’s definitely Park Seung-kyu’s son.”

Jinseo sighed deeply.

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After class, as usual, Do-bin ran over to Yena.

“Yena, let’s go home.”

However, Yena wasn’t in a good mood. She sat quietly without packing her bag, looking sulky.

“I don’t want to go home.”

“Why? Did you get a 50 on the spelling test too?”

“No. Mommy didn’t play with me.”

“…”

“Our mom only loves Ye-jun.”

“No, that’s not true. I know because I have a younger sibling, and your mom doesn’t just love Ye-jun; she takes care of him more because he can’t do anything yet.”

“Dad can take care of me, and Grandma can take care of me too.”

Do-bin tried to comfort her, but it was no use.

“I didn’t have a dad, but Ye-jun does. So Mommy can just keep being my mommy.”

She was receiving plenty of love from her dad, so it was okay if her mom loved her a little less.

Yena’s heartfelt plea, filled with tears, left Do-bin speechless.

He recalled what his mom had said that morning. When his mom mentioned that he might have a real mom and dad, he felt a bit anxious.

He was afraid she might immediately say she’d take him to his real parents. He understood that going to his real parents was the right thing to do, but he couldn’t be sure if he could love them as much as he loved his current mom and dad.

“This is a secret, but I’ll tell you only.”

Do-bin spoke in a serious voice.

“Actually, my mom and dad might not be my real mom and dad either?”

“Really? How did you find that out?”

“My mom told me.”

Yena’s eyes widened at Do-bin’s confession.

“Then what will you do? Are you going to go to your real mom and dad?”

“Yeah. That might happen.”

Yena, who had been holding back tears, finally burst into sobs at the thought that Do-bin might leave her.

Do-bin felt awkward. While it was a bit pleasing that his girlfriend was so sad about his potential absence, he couldn’t let Yena continue crying.

“No, I didn’t say that to make you cry.”

“…”

“Your mom really loves you.”

At Do-bin’s words, Yena wiped her tears and stopped crying.

“My mom loves me so much even though she’s not my real mom, so your mom must love you even more because she is your real mom. Isn’t that right?”

Do-bin’s reasoning was a bit shaky, but it also made sense in a way. Perhaps he felt a little more pity for Do-bin’s situation, which made her grateful for her own.

“And your mom is treating Ye-jun well right now to make sure he listens to her later.”

Do-bin went on to reveal the secret of life. Yena’s expression grew serious.

“So you should bear with it and be nice to Ye-jun. If you’re nice to him, he’ll listen to you later.”

There was a certain confidence in someone who had two younger siblings.

“You just have to hold out for four years. Then you can make him do all your chores.”

“…”

“If you have a toy you want to throw away, you can give it to Ye-jun. You can even play hair salon with his hair.”

Do-bin earnestly listed the benefits of being the eldest.

Ch179 - [Side Story] Children Grow Up Too Fast (3)

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In the office of the Head of Max Planning.

After finishing a business meeting and lunch, Ji-heon returned to the company and sat quietly until he dozed off. When Seung-kyu came in and noticed, he gently tried to wake him, but Ji-heon didn’t stir. This was the first time Seung-kyu had seen his friend like this.

Seeing Ji-heon’s hand sluggishly moving as if he were soothing a baby in his dream, Seung-kyu couldn’t help but chuckle. However, feeling a bit sorry for him, he decided to give up on waking him and sat down on the sofa.

The nap didn’t last long. Ji-heon, who had been resting his chin on his hand, suddenly snapped awake, his arm going limp.

“Are you awake?”

At Seung-kyu’s question, Ji-heon let out a long sigh, wearing a serious expression. The dream had felt like an extension of reality. In the dream, he was still comforting Ye-jun. And beside him was Yena, whining, “I like mom, not dad!”

Before Ye-jun was born, Ji-heon had received a lot of advice from others, but the reality of parenting was on a whole different level. Most of all, he could hardly get any sleep. The baby cried day and night, and he had to hold him all day long.

With a still-sleepy expression, Ji-heon spoke.

“Park Seung-kyu.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re really amazing.”

“Why all of a sudden?”

“Just because. You seem impressive. I really respect you.”

At Ji-heon’s resigned tone, Seung-kyu laughed again.

Now the two had become comrades who understood each other without needing to complain or share their burdens.

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In the first-grade classroom.

As she was about to leave for home, Saebyeol noticed Yena crying and approached her. Do-bin tensed up.

“Yena, did you cry? Why are you crying?”

After being comforted by Do-bin, Yena calmed down enough to respond.

“It’s because of mom and the baby.”

“Why about mom and the baby?”

“Mom likes the baby more.”

“…”

“The second one is lucky. Mom is always by their side.”

Do-bin, another firstborn, agreed with Yena’s sentiment.

“Yeah, the second one is really lucky.”

“Guys, you know what? The second child also has a hard time.”

Saebyeol let out a deep sigh, as if she had lived a long life.

“I can’t argue with my sister. If I touch even a little of her stuff, she hits me with a Go stone.”

“Really? I don’t think Saebom would do that. She seems like an angel.”

“Angel? No way! She’s a monster!”

“Why is your sister a monster? How can you say that?”

As Saebyeol raised her voice about her sister being a monster, Yena also snapped back. She reacted as Ye-jun’s sister and as someone who liked Saebom.

“Right, you shouldn’t call your sister a monster!”

Seizing the moment, Do-bin joined in to back Yena up.

“Whoa, I didn’t mean she’s a real monster; I just meant she can be a monster sometimes. You wouldn’t know.”

Having lived with his sister for eight years, Saebyeol sighed again, implying that the firstborns didn’t understand the feelings of the younger ones.

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After returning home from school, Do-bin greeted Jin-seo.

“I’m back!”

“Did you do well on the dictation?”

“Yeah! I did well!”

Do-bin showed Jin-seo his dictation notebook, which had a score of 50, half correct and half wrong.

“I didn’t even study, but I got half right, so that’s good, right, Mom?”

Having concluded that he had done well, Do-bin sought confirmation from his mother, leaving Jin-seo at a loss for words.

“Yeah… you can do better next time. You did well, son.”

“Thanks! And Mom! I did something good today.”

“What did you do?”

Jin-seo, who had been sulking about the dictation score, perked up at Do-bin’s words, wondering if he had received praise from the teacher for doing a good deed.

“I comforted Yena because she looked sad because of the baby.”

However, the key point was once again about Yena. Jin-seo managed a lifeless smile.

“It seems like Yena dislikes the baby. Isn’t it strange? I don’t feel that way.”

Son, you used to step all over your little brother.

Seeing Do-bin stepping over the arms of his younger brother, Doyun, who was lying on the floor flailing his limbs, had been quite a shocking experience. Thankfully, he was a lightweight; it could have led to a major accident.

“Anyway, I comforted Yena to get along with the baby. I did well, right?”

Jin-seo thought it was cute how her son had forgotten what it was like to be a tadpole and could only remember his childhood days. Compared to then, he had grown quite mature.

Yeah. Regardless of dictation or anything else, I’m grateful you’re growing up so responsibly.

“You did well.”

“Yeah. Mom, since I did something good, can I have ice cream?”

Her responsible son was quite bold.

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Yena bravely opened the front door.

“I’m home!”

“Yena’s back?”

Jeong-o, who had come out to the living room after putting Ye-jun to sleep and was sitting on the sofa, stood up groggily. Even at Yena’s cheerful greeting, Jeong-o’s expression somehow lacked energy.

Having felt much lighter after being comforted by Do-bin, Yena’s spirits fell again as she returned home.

Her mom hadn’t called her Princess Yena.

Although she knew she couldn’t be a princess every day, it still hurt her feelings when she realized it.

Bit by bit, I’m drifting away from being a princess, and a new prince will take my place. The thought made her want to cry. Suddenly, she felt worried about the time that would come.

May is Yena’s month. The month of Yena’s birthday.

But now, even in this blessed May, Yena had begun to feel sorrow. Her younger sibling had been born even earlier than her birthday, which worried her.

With both Mom and Dad busy taking care of the baby, would they have time to celebrate my birthday?

Not knowing Yena's complicated feelings, Jeong-o kindly spoke.

"Shall I cut you some watermelon? Do you want some watermelon?"

"Yeah."

Yena weakly responded, then went into her room, set down her bag, and secretly slipped into her mom's bedroom.

Ye-jun was sound asleep in the crib, breathing softly. Even when she poked his cheek, the baby didn't wake up. Though she wanted to annoy him further, she remembered what Saebyeol had said and refrained from being too harsh. She thought it would be unpleasant to be called a monster by her little brother.

"Ye-jun, why do you make Mom and your sister suffer?"

Taking advantage of the moment when her mother was absent, Yena spilled her feelings.

"Why were you born in May and disrupt your sister's birthday?"

Last year, she had been talking about her birthday for a whole week in advance. Perhaps because she was a year older or felt anxious about being ignored by Mom and Dad, she couldn't bring herself to say anything.

But she couldn't just give up her birthday…

Thinking it over, Yena came out of the bedroom holding her dictation notebook and went to Jeong-o.

"Mom, I got a perfect score on my dictation today! Look, it's May 25!"

Yena pointed to the date above the circled '100' in her notebook.

It wasn’t the score that mattered, but the date—it was a roundabout way of saying that if Mom realized what day it was today, she would quickly understand what was happening the day after tomorrow.

“Oh, really! Our Yena is great at dictation and has beautiful handwriting!”

However, Jeong-o only praised Yena’s dictation score and her handwriting. This was an unexpected obstacle for Yena.

Flustered, Yena threw out an easier hint.

“Mom, there’s another dictation the day after tomorrow, on May 27.”

“Is that so? Do you want me to help?”

“…No, it’s fine. I’ll do it myself.”

Having failed to engrave the date in her mind, Yena slumped her shoulders and entered her room.

But she couldn’t give up like this. Thinking hard again, Yena secretly called her grandfather.

As she heard the ringing, she swallowed nervously. Fortunately, her grandfather picked up quickly.

[Is this our Princess Yena?] As expected, Jae-gwang’s voice was loud and lively, as if Yena was the center of his universe. Her spirits lifted at his reaction.

Yena quickly got to the point.

“Grandpa! Do you know what day May 27 is?”

[May 27? Of course I know! It’s our Yena’s birthday. I’m just waiting for that day.] “Really?”

[Absolutely!] “But, Grandpa, our mom and dad might forget.”

[What? How could they forget that?] “Because Mom and Dad are too busy taking care of Ye-jun.”

Yena’s voice grew small.

“So, could you tell Mom and Dad that May 27 is Yena’s birthday?”

[Can’t Yena say it?] “No.”

She didn’t want to seem like she was begging for attention, but she still wanted to receive it.

She was grateful to have a grandfather she could confide in like this.

[Okay. I’ll tell them, but Yena,] “Yes?”

[Your mom and dad will remember everything. There’s no need for me to tell them; they know it all. I know everything.] Jae-gwang’s voice, which was gently persuading Yena, became even more intimate.

[And this is a secret, Yena.] “……”

[Grandpa thinks our Yena is the best.] Jae-gwang didn’t forget to make a little appeal while he sensed his granddaughter’s heart softening.

[Even if your little brother is born, and even if more of your cousins are born, to me, you will always be number one.] Yena’s heart raced at the unexpected confession.

“Really?”

[Of course. I really mean it.] “Then if I tell Grandpa not to hold Ye-jun, he won’t, right?”

[Of course! We have to listen to everything our Yena says.] Yena couldn’t help but smile at her grandfather’s confident answer.

In her mind, she pictured her grandfather not holding Ye-jun while her younger brother pouted, asking to be held. A fleeting thought crossed her

mind: it was sad that her younger brother wouldn’t receive their grandfather’s love.

Finally, Yena was able to feel a bit more generous.

“Grandpa, you can hold Ye-jun. It’s okay because you think I’m number one.”

Just knowing that she was loved was enough to make her feel better.

Thanks to her grandfather, Yena felt good. However, as more time passed and her birthday approached, she felt her confidence wane again. Mom and Dad continued to be busy, and they seemed to have no time to listen to Yena.

Thus, on the morning of May 27…

“Princess Yena. Jeong Yena.”

Even though she vaguely sensed that it was past 8 o’clock, Yena didn’t open her eyes. Jeong-o approached and gently tried to wake her up, but Yena squeezed her eyes shut even tighter.

“Are you not getting up? You have to go to school.”

“I don’t want to. I’m not going.”

Yena stubbornly refused to get up. She didn’t want to face reality.

“Then we won’t have a birthday party?”

A birthday party?

At her mother’s voice, Yena’s eyes flew open.

“Happy birthday to our Yena!”

In front of Yena stood Jeong-o, Ji-heon, Guk-soon, and Young-mi, all wearing party hats, along with Ye-jun, who was also sporting a party hat.

Tears welled up in Yena’s eyes.

“Didn’t you forget?”

“Why would I forget? It’s the most important day in the world.”

Jeong-o answered Yena’s question.

Really? Is it really the most important day in the world? Even to Mom and Dad?

Overcome with emotion, Yena threw her arms around her mother’s neck.

Next to her, Ji-heon placed a hand on Yena’s shoulder.

“Happy birthday, Yena!”

“Daddy!”

Yena immediately moved into her father’s embrace.

“Today, let’s play together with Mom and Dad. We’ll do everything our Yena wants.”

“Aren’t you going to work, Dad?”

“I don’t have to go today.”

“Wow!” A cheer of excitement erupted.

Ch180 - [Side Story] Kids Grow Up Too Fast (4)

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Two days ago, Ji-heon received a call from Jae-gwang.

“Yes, Father.”

[How are you doing?]
“Of course.”

[Isn’t it hard raising the baby?]
“If I said it was hard, would you give me parental leave?”

[What kind of leave can a contract worker get?]
Jae-gwang brushed aside Ji-heon’s small wish as a joke and subtly began to introduce the topic.

[By the way, about the day after tomorrow. Do you have some time in the evening?]
“That day is my day off. It’s Yena’s birthday.”

[Right, right, right.]
“Father, did you forget Yena’s birthday?”

[Forget? Why would I forget? I was just checking if you might forget.]
“Why would I forget? Please talk sense.”

After a brief exchange of snappy remarks, both father and son fell silent.

After an awkward pause, Ji-heon spoke again.

“Did you call about this? Is something going on?”

“No, it’s nothing… I’m just planning to visit on Yena’s birthday evening.”

There was something suspicious about Jae-gwang’s answer.

Tilting his head, Ji-heon hung up and reported to Jeong-o that something like this had happened earlier that day. Jeong-o also tilted her head in confusion.

Now that she thought about it… earlier, Yena had subtly pointed out the date of her birthday too.

Although she had never forgotten that Yena’s birthday was approaching, Jeong-o hadn’t brought it up first.

She thought Yena would mention it herself eventually, so she had waited to see when that would be, but she hadn’t expected it to be this quiet. In hindsight, it seemed that Yena had intentionally chosen not to say anything.

Was the little girl holding back from talking about her birthday?

“Do you think there’s something Yena and your father talked about?”

Jeong-o raised her question. Ji-heon immediately contacted Jae-gwang again to pry about what had happened that day. And reluctantly, Jae-gwang revealed the truth.

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And so, on May 27th,

Jeong-o, Ji-heon, and Guk-soon woke up early to set up a birthday table and decorate the house. They then went to Yena’s room with Ye-jun, who had just woken up. Initially, Yena pretended to be lazy and kept her eyes closed, but at the mention of “birthday,” she sat up straight.

“Dad, does that mean I don’t have to go to school today?”

In Ji-heon’s arms, Yena asked excitedly.

“You can do whatever you want, Yena. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t want to go! No, no, I want to go! I have to do the dictation.”

“Well, what will you do after school?”

“Flying yoga!”

Ji-heon expected her to think about it for a while, but Yena’s response came very quickly.

“I want to learn flying yoga with Mom and Dad!”

Though he had a vague idea of what flying yoga was, Ji-heon had never seen it properly before. He immediately searched for it on his phone.

Images of women performing graceful poses like ballerinas with hammocks hanging from the ceiling filled the screen. Here and there, there were pictures of men as well, though they were few and far between.

With a chuckle, Jeong-o glanced at Ji-heon’s search screen.

“Are you saying our Yena wants to do this with Mom and Dad?”

“Yeah!”

“Even in those tight clothes?”

“Yeah!”

Yena answered loudly at Jeong-o’s question, encouraging Ji-heon.

“Dad, you’ll do it with us, right?”

Answer him. You promised to do anything.

Jeong-o stretched her lips into a long line and looked at Ji-heon. It was amusing to see his eyes darting around.

“Sure. Let’s do it.”

Although it sounded like a sigh mixed with his answer, Ji-heon accepted it readily.

“Wow!” Yena cheered excitedly.

Yena had breakfast at the birthday table that Guk-soon and Ji-heon prepared, took several photos in the living room decorated by her mom, and then went to school. The difference this year was that she no longer wore her birthday princess dress. Graduating from her princess attire and tiara, Yena’s outfit was now simple and convenient.

While Yena was at school, Ji-heon reserved a yoga lesson and found a store to buy yoga clothes. Then, at 5 PM, after Yena finished her classes at the Go and art academies, the three of them—Jeong-o, Ji-heon, and Yena—headed to the yoga studio.

The instructor was surprised to see that the three of them had come prepared for their first flying yoga class. Moreover, with their slim figures and no excess fat, they looked like a family ballet troupe.

“All three of you have physiques suitable for yoga. You’ll have a lot of fun learning!”

The instructor’s eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as she started the lesson.

“Since it’s all of your first time, let’s learn some basic poses. Hold the hammock with both hands and drape your body underneath. This will turn your body upside down. If you hook your feet in the hammock from this position, you’ll be in the monkey pose.”

In the blink of an eye, the instructor twisted her legs and hung upside down in the hammock. Ji-heon was the first to replicate the pose, having carefully

watched her movements. Jeong-o and Yena also hung in the hammock with the instructor's help.

The instructor returned to her position and demonstrated a connected movement.

"From here, hold onto the hammock again, lift your upper body, and grab your arms behind you. This is called the Tinkerbell pose."

Tinkerbell! A name Yena knew well! She fell in love with the Tinkerbell pose.

However, as Yena attempted the movements as instructed, she quickly became frustrated. While the instructor's movements looked effortless, seeing them in action was different from doing them herself. The pose was difficult without sufficient core strength and grip.

Worried about straining her body, Jeong-o had given up early and was swinging in the hammock. While the instructor and Yena focused solely on each other, Ji-heon felt the pressure on his shoulders. He had to master the pose.

Although he was strong, he wasn't very flexible, so his body moved stiffly. Nevertheless, with commendable stamina, he managed to perform the pose without much difficulty. The thick straps dug into his skin. Though it felt like torture under the guise of exercise, Ji-heon transformed into the male Tinkerbell through the power of love.

"Father! You're doing great! You really have a talent for this!"

The instructor clapped excitedly. Encouraged by Ji-heon's success, Yena grabbed the hammock again, with the instructor helping her.

"Bee-boo, bee-boo. Bee-boo, bee-boo."

"Huh?"

"My legs hurt. Bee-boo, bee-boo. Bee-boo, bee-boo."

What had been torture for Ji-heon was just as hard for Yena. She couldn’t scream loudly since she had insisted on doing flying yoga with her mom and dad, so she made adorable siren sounds instead. Ji-heon couldn’t help but smile despite the pain.

It was tough, but time passed quickly in their laughter.

“Yena really resembles her dad; she’s doing great!”

The instructor commented proudly.

As the lesson ended, Yena seemed reluctant to leave, as if she were wishing it would continue. Ji-heon asked her, “Yena, do you want to come again?”

“Yeah!”

“Then shall we come every week?”

“Can we do that?”

Seeing Yena’s excited expression as she asked, even though she knew her dad was busy and didn’t want to pressure him, Ji-heon felt a lump in his throat.

“Of course. Absolutely.”

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When they returned home, it was evening. To celebrate Yena’s birthday, they had invited Jaegwang, Youngmi, and Seung-kyu’s family. It was party time again.

Jeong-o was the first to present a gift.

“Happy birthday, Yena! This is a present from Mom.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a book you love!”

Youngmi’s gift was a crocheted bag that Yena had once asked her to make.

“Here you go. It’s the kangaroo bag our Yena ordered.”

But even holding the lovingly crafted bag, Yena complained.

“Grandma! If it’s a kangaroo bag, it should have a baby kangaroo in this pocket too!”

“I’ll make that for you later. Do you know how hard I worked to crochet this?”

Youngmi sighed, her dark circles under her eyes deep from all the effort she had put in to finish it in time for Yena’s birthday. In truth, Yena had been teasing her for fun, enjoying how flustered her grandma got each time she mentioned it.

Next was Ji-heon’s gift. His was the largest.

“This is a ball-jointed doll that our Yena loves.”

“Wow!”

Yena cheered, thrilled to receive a gift she had wanted for so long.

Seeing this, Jaegwang couldn’t hold back and jumped in.

“Yena! Grandpa has a gold medal snack for you!”

The box from Grandpa was quite impressive. Jaegwang had come up with the idea when Yena won the Go tournament last year.

The snack was packaged to look like a shiny gold medal. The name was “Princess’s Gift,” and it was a product that would soon be sold in supermarkets nationwide by summer.

Yena’s mouth dropped open wide.

“It’s a snack that Grandpa made just for Yena.”

“Wow. Grandpa, you’re the best!”

“See? I’m the best.”

Jaegwang shrugged proudly beside Ji-heon.

In the midst of the family’s noisy gift exchange, which had turned into a bit of a competition, Dobin also presented a small box.

“Yena! I have a gift too!”

“What is it?”

“Slime.”

“Wow! It’s slime!”

Yena couldn’t contain her excitement and jumped up and down. For Yena, who had been unable to play with slime because her mom didn’t allow it, Dobin’s simple gift was the best of all. The expressions of the family members, who had presented flashy gifts, dimmed a bit.

Turning his head with a hint of disappointment, Ji-heon noticed a card that had fallen beside him. He picked it up; it was a card from Dobin.

– Happy birthday, Yena! Let’s get married when we grow up!

This kid, how dare he propose to someone already.

Ji-heon discreetly tucked the card into his pocket, hoping no one would notice. Dobin, realizing the card was missing, looked around Ji-heon.

“Sir, have you seen a card that fell here?”

“No, I haven’t seen it.”

Ji-heon played innocent, pretending not to know anything.

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After an exciting birthday party, Yena finally lay down to sleep past 10 PM.

Filled with happiness, she burst out excitedly, “Ah! I wish tomorrow were my birthday too!”

Ji-heon, lying next to her, gently brushed Yena’s hair and thought to himself.

I’ll make that happen for you, sweetheart.

Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and every day, I will cherish and love you as if it were your birthday.

“Dad, today was the best birthday of my life.”

The best birthday in an eight-year-old’s life.

I’m honored too.

I’m honored to share the best birthday in Yena’s life.

A day I couldn’t have imagined last year at this time.

It’s amazing, isn’t it? There was only one person in the world who called me Dad, and because of that one person, my life has changed so much, and I’m so happy. Jeong-o, did you feel that way too?

As moisture gathered in Ji-heon’s throat, Yena’s eyelids gently fluttered down. Perhaps playing had tired her out; she fell asleep quickly.

Moments later, Jeong-o rushed in, having just put Yejun, who had started whining at the same time, to sleep. She wanted to say goodnight to her daughter on her birthday.

“Is Yena asleep?”

“Yes.”

“What did she say before falling asleep?”

“She said it was a wonderful birthday.”

Jeong-o sat down next to Ji-heon, who had gotten up, and looked at the sleeping Yena. Her expression was happy and peaceful.

Just like always, she expected Yena to whine for her mom, but today, Yena fell asleep without fussing. It was as if she had grown up a bit.

Children grow up so fast. You can’t see them growing day by day, but one day you suddenly realize they’ve grown so much.

Today, it felt like the child had grown a lot.

Jeong-o felt thankful and a bit guilty.

She wished time would pass a little more slowly.

Ch181 - [Side Story] Forever by My Side (1)

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On a quiet evening, while Yejun was fast asleep, Guksun grilled meat after hearing her daughter sing about wanting some. However, all the meat ended up wrapped in lettuce and into her granddaughter’s mouth.

“I don’t want lettuce wraps!”

When Jeong-o kept trying to feed Yena the wraps, Yena whined.

“You have to eat the lettuce wraps so you can poop properly! Hurry up and eat!”

“I don’t want to! I can poop just fine!”

“Look at your little tummy. You’ve gained 3 kg since starting first grade. You’ve only grown 1 cm taller, but your weight has gone up. It’s all because you’re not eating balanced meals. Do you understand?”

“Hmph! I hate you, Mom!”

Eventually, Yena, unable to bear her mother’s nagging, got up from the table and went to her room.

Seizing the moment, Jeong-o stuffed the grilled meat into her mouth, busy with her chopsticks as if someone were chasing her. This time, Guksun chimed in.

“Chew your food well.”

“Yeah, I’m chewing it well.”

“Eat some of the other side dishes too. You’re nagging Yena like that, but here you are eating only meat. You need to eat some vegetables.”

“But I’m an adult.”

“……”

“I have to eat meat first when Yena isn’t watching. I’ll show her that I’m eating vegetables later.”

The difference between how she acted in front of her daughter and her mother was stark. Guksun gently coaxed her daughter.

“But it’s something your mom made, so please eat a bit more.”

“Sure. Since you made it, I can eat this much, but I won’t eat any other vegetables, Mom.”

“Is that something to brag about? You need to eat your veggies to be healthy.”

“Eh, if we’re talking about health, I’m eating for my mental health. Ah, today I also ate vegetables along with my meat, so now I can think, ‘Since I ate vegetables, I’m a healthy person,’ and that brings me comfort.”

A child like this had grown up to be a mother herself. A child who always seemed like she would only stay in her arms.

Guksun couldn’t help but let out a sigh and smile.

Since Yena became a high school student and for a few years during her university days, they had lived together, and it was hard for her to imagine her daughter being far away from her.

Others often asked if it wasn’t difficult to support her daughter, wearing serious expressions. Each time, Guksun’s answer was always the same: that she relied on her daughter. Living together made her feel so reassured.

That was true. Although things had become a bit busier with the arrival of her second grandchild, life was far more stable than before.

With her body at ease, she found opportunities to reflect on herself. She realized she preferred being busy rather than sitting still, that she wanted to take care of others and enjoyed achieving results in her social life.

One day, while she was deep in thought about herself, the cooking academy instructor approached her. It was the day when Guksun's freely made dish had captivated the tastes of her fellow students without any theoretical background.

"Why do you think you're learning to cook again? You're already so good at it."

There was sincerity and respect in the instructor's eyes.

"We teach and learn things in a structured way based on what's in the books, but you already know how to season food on your own."

"I wanted to study when I was younger, but I couldn't. No, I gave up studying because life was too busy. Looking back, it seems that being busy was just an excuse. Even though I said I wanted to study, I really didn't have the mental space to do so."

Guksun smiled softly, recalling the days when she worked while carrying her young daughter.

"If I had studied back then, I might have gone down a different path than I am now. It's only now that I have the mental space. This is truly studying because I want to do it. I feel a bit guilty for taking classes here as a hobby compared to the young people studying to get a job and to live, but I'm also studying to live."

"……"

"Being here really gives me strength."

All the responses were sincere. The cooking academy classmates and instructor didn’t know who Guksun’s son-in-law or granddaughter was. They were solely focused on Guksun, encouraging and supporting her, which gave her energy every time.

Before long, Guksun had obtained all the cooking certifications she wanted and was about to graduate from the certification course. Her classmates, who had become close, took her to the cooking station and grabbed a camera.

“Can you show us one of your confident dishes? We’ll make it a Guksun recipe.”

“No way! Guksun’s cooking should be sold for money!”

“Oh, then how about opening a video channel, Guksun?”

“Wow! That sounds great! The lady who lives next door runs a cooking channel too. I thought she was just bragging, but then I got a chance to taste her cooking… Guksun’s food is way better! No comparison at all.”

“Guksun, we’ll help you set up a channel! You can post anything on it!”

The energetic young people, who had been chattering away, were determined to create a video channel for Guksun. Guksun didn’t refuse, appreciating their enthusiasm for supporting her future.

As the young people passionately explained everything, Guksun became interested as well.

“So, I just need to press this button?”

“Yes. I’ll gift you a stand for your camera. You can set it up like this and record from a high angle. You don’t need to show your face; just focus on your cooking hands. You can chat casually like you’re talking with a friend while cooking. Easy, right?”

It wasn’t exactly easy, but the idea of being able to continue communicating with her classmates made her feel satisfied.

“If you ever have questions while running the channel, feel free to reach out. I’ll teach you.”

And so, Guksun quickly learned how to operate a video channel.

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One night, Jeong-o, who had been tilting her head all day, asked Jiheon as he came home from work.

“Don’t you notice anything different about my mom lately?”

“Different how?”

“She seems more vibrant than usual? She’s been smiling a lot.”

“Our mother always smiles.”

“No, it’s not that. She keeps looking at her phone and smiling.”

“Maybe she’s watching some funny videos?”

“I don’t think so. It felt different. It was more like a slightly fluttering smile.”

“……”

“There’s definitely something going on with Mom.”

Jeong-o was sure that her mother had a secret.

“Maybe she has a boyfriend? Or at least a ‘someone’?”

Jeong-o cautiously suggested the possibility of a ‘someone’ with sparkling eyes, and Jiheon found it surprising how excited she was imagining it.

“Don’t you feel jealous?”

“Why would I be jealous? I have a husband too.”

"……"

"I just hope that whoever Mom is seeing is a good person."

"Of course, it must be someone good. If it's someone my mom is seeing."

After exchanging a few words, people might hastily conclude that Guksun is an endlessly gentle and kind person, but in reality, she was not soft at all; she was a person of strong character, tougher than anyone else.

With her natural insight and sharp perception, she could accurately judge right from wrong and make optimal decisions in a short amount of time.

"So, if Mom meets someone good and ends up getting married?"

"Huh?"

"If she meets a good person, she might get married."

"……"

"Then she could end up living separately."

When Jiheon pointed this out, Jeong-o's smile faded as if she had just realized it.

Jeong-o responded with an uncertain voice.
"…But even if she gets married, they could still live together."

"That's her choice."

The thought of living separately from her mom had never crossed Jeong-o's mind before.

Feeling anxious, Jeong-o ran to Guksun's room. When Guksun saw her coming, she abruptly turned off the phone screen she had been looking at and hid it under her knee.

"Why? Is something wrong?"

Instead of answering Guksun’s question, Jeong-o laid her head on Guksun’s lap and spoke abruptly.

“Mom, you love me the most in the world, right?”

“Why are you saying this again?”

“I’m your baby who needs your love. Your eternal baby.”

“What baby talk is this? Your babies can hear you.”

“Mom!”

With the sudden display of affection, Guksun’s eyes widened. Jeong-o rubbed her head against Guksun’s lap repeatedly, then suddenly jumped up when she heard Ye-jun crying. Guksun thought it was quite an amusing day.

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One hot day.

Jae-gwang invited Jiheon’s family over to his house, and Jiheon, Jeong-o, Ye-na, and Ye-jun were getting ready to leave. Jeong-o pouted and complained that Guksun should go with them.

“It would be nice if Mom came along.”

“You all go enjoy yourselves. I’m a bit tired today.”

“Okay, we’ll be back.”

“Mother, we’ll be back.”

Jiheon, holding Ye-jun, also said goodbye.

“Alright. Have fun.”

Once the family was out the door, Guksun let out a sigh, and her secret work began. She picked up her phone and opened the video channel

account.

In just a month since the channel was established, she had over 400 subscribers. She hadn’t told anyone except her cooking academy classmates and had quietly uploaded a few videos, but it was fascinating to see the subscriber count gradually rise.

It was challenging to work alone at home after having received help from her classmates to upload videos at the cooking academy. Setting up the camera at a high angle with the stand alone took a long time. Still, Guksun managed to do it by herself.

As she pressed the recording button, Guksun began to speak.

“Today, I’m going to make something refreshing: cold cucumber soup and sikhye (sweet rice drink).”

After having filmed a few times, she was no longer as nervous as she had been at first.

“Sikhye is a traditional dish usually eaten in the cold season, but now everyone has refrigerators, so there’s no need for that. Honestly, it’s much better to eat it on hot days. When your body is warm, you should eat something refreshing. And when your body gets cold, you should eat something warm. It’s said that you should match heat with heat and cold with cold, but you don’t have to try so hard to overcome it.”

Talking to herself in an empty house still felt awkward, but…

“When you take a warm shower in the middle of winter, you don’t want to step out of the bathroom, right? Your body is still too cold. At that point, you keep telling yourself just a little more, just a little more… as you adjust the warm water, don’t you? Only when your body feels warm enough do you finally dare to step outside.”

While preparing the ingredients and occasionally checking the video screen, Guksun immersed herself in filming.

“The same goes for the heart. When I’m not warm enough inside, I don’t have to share what I have with someone else. I can just sit still. There’s no need to feel guilty for not giving to the people around me.”

As she babbled on for a while, lost in her thoughts,

Click.

“Mom.”

“Mother.”

The front door opened, and the voices of her daughter and son-in-law could be heard. They had returned earlier than expected.

Guksun, startled, quickly pressed the stop button on the recording.

As soon as she put the camera stand away, Jiheon approached the kitchen.

“Welcome back.”

“Oh, you’re back? You came home early?”

“Yes. They had to go to a funeral together. But…”

Jiheon’s eyes narrowed as he spotted the phone stand that Guksun had hurriedly hidden. Guksun felt a cold sweat bead on her forehead.

Ch182 - [Side Story] Always by My Side (2)

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Did he see? Did he find out?

Guksun felt her lips dry out from nervousness.

After a while, Jiheon asked, “How are you feeling? Are you okay?”

“Uh… yeah. I’m fine. I was just a bit tired for a moment, but I’m okay now.”

“Glad to hear that.”

Jiheon nodded at Guksun’s response, which concealed the truth. She felt that if she were found out, it would be embarrassing, but she had managed to escape unscathed. Guksun let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Even after that, Jiheon’s attitude didn’t change. However, as time went on, Guksun’s heart grew heavier. While her daughter might not have noticed, Jiheon, who was perceptive, must have realized that she was hiding something.

Ultimately, Guksun was the first to speak up.

“…You’re not going to ask me anything?”

As she subtly opened the conversation, she could see Jiheon’s eyes tremble slightly, as if he had been caught.

Jiheon truly didn’t know what to say. A few days ago, he had clearly seen Guksun doing something in the kitchen.

But since Guksun seemed very flustered, as if she wanted to hide it, Jiheon thought it best to pretend he didn’t know.

Guksun felt relieved instead. She had managed to broach the subject correctly. She had been unnecessarily concerned about what Jiheon thought —whether he knew or was pretending not to—and now that she had spoken, she felt lighter.

“I’ve been doing this.”

Guksun opened her video channel to show him the content she had created.

As Jiheon took the phone from her and scrolled through the screen, his eyes widened even more.

“You made this, Mother? You opened the channel yourself?”

“My classmates from the cooking academy helped me set it up. I couldn’t have done it alone.”

Guksun shyly revealed everything.

“The other day, I was used to filming only at the cooking academy, so I wanted to try filming alone when nobody was home.”

“You have over 400 subscribers.”

“It’s surprisingly been going up a little every day. I was planning to talk about it after about three months. By then, I thought it might be something I could be proud of.”

“Four hundred is really impressive.”

As Jiheon continued to look through the content, he realized that his mother was trying to create content. He had not imagined that she would already

have a channel up and running with over 400 subscribers in just a month, which made him even more surprised.

Somehow, Jiheon felt a surge of excitement himself.

“If you’re okay with it, I can set up a workspace for you.”

“Oh no, that’s not necessary. It’s just a hobby.”

Guksun waved her hands at Jiheon’s suggestion.

“If I try to take it too seriously, it becomes burdensome, and I can’t enjoy it.”

“…”

“I can sometimes film at the cooking academy, and the twenty-year-old classmates all help me out, so I’m just doing it for fun.”

“I don’t want to disrupt your happiness, but I’m sure you can become even more famous and receive more love.”

Jiheon opened his mouth with a serious expression.

“Mother, I’ll be realistic. Since your recipes are now open online, the content will inevitably become a product. If you continue your activities, you’ll obviously become more famous, and there might be people interested in your work.”

“…”

“If you don’t mind that, I won’t say anything further, but honestly, your talent is too precious to waste.”

Amidst Jiheon’s rational advice, a personal interest inevitably crept in. To Jiheon, Guksun had become an incredibly precious family member.

“Since you’re going to be famous anyway, I thought it would be better to do it properly.”

“…”

“Advertising is the same. While the ideas for ads are important, the image matters too. If it looks clean and the quality is good, people will be drawn in more.”

At Jiheon’s opinion, Guksun’s expression grew solemn. She, too, was hesitating.

“Anyway, that’s just my opinion. Don’t feel too pressured, but please think about it.”

Jiheon didn’t persistently push but stood up from his seat. Now, it was up to Guksun to decide.

However, now that Jiheon knew about Guksun’s channel, he couldn’t just stay still. He pressed the subscribe button and began watching all of the videos Guksun had created with full concentration.

It was enjoyable, even more so than he had expected. It wasn’t just Guksun’s unique cooking methods; the content had warmth.

Coming home after work, he felt comforted by his mother’s voice. The emotion conveyed in Guksun’s voice held a special power, capturing a feeling that Jiheon had never experienced with Yumi before their marriage.

He couldn’t just sit idly by. Jiheon decided to take the initiative. He thought that if he set up a workspace and equipped it well, Guksun wouldn’t be able to resist.

And to do everything, he needed his wife’s approval.

Ultimately, Jiheon decided to confess everything to Jeong-oh.

Upon discovering Guksun’s channel, Jeong-oh was even more surprised than Jiheon.

“…Mom made this?”

“She did really well, right? She’s already a pro creator.”

“So that’s why Mom has been in such a good mood lately?”

Jeong-oh felt relieved in a different way. As she clicked on the videos on the channel one by one, Jiheon spoke up.

“I think it would be great if she had a workspace.”

“Definitely! We should fully support her!”

Thus, the couple began their special plan. But they decided that Jiheon would take the lead in all matters. Since Guksun hadn’t confided in Jeong-oh yet, Jeong-oh chose to remain silent.

“I won’t let on for now. I’ll wait until Mom tells her directly.”

.*. *. *. *. *. *. *.

A little later.

Guksun, who was learning video editing at the cooking academy, stood up after an hour. Jiheon called her urgently, saying he needed her help to buy a gift for Jeong-oh.

Whenever it was for her daughter, Guksun would always roll up her sleeves and jump in, so Jiheon’s request felt pleasant.

“Guksun, you’re leaving early today.”

“I have to go; my son-in-law needs my help with something. He said he has to go somewhere.”

Even without saying who her son-in-law was, she enjoyed subtly bragging like this. As Guksun shared her pride, her classmates teased her, asking if she was going on a date with him, and they followed her out.

The thought of not revealing her son-in-law’s identity made Guksun shake off her colleagues’ farewells and arrive slightly late for her appointment.

Outside the academy, Jiheon was waiting. As Guksun got into Jiheon’s car, she greeted him.

“Sorry for being late. Did you wait long?”

“No, I just got here.”

Jiheon answered shortly and drove off.

The place Jiheon took her to was not far from home. It was a commercial building with a clothing store, so Guksun naturally thought they were going there to shop, but Jiheon went up to the second floor.

Striding ahead, Jiheon stood in front of a door with a keypad lock.

When the door opened, a beautiful space resembling a small restaurant appeared. Guksun’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“…What is all this?”

“This is your workspace, Mother.”

The bright, open space was large enough to accommodate three or four people comfortably, featuring a sizable wooden preparation counter and a spacious dining table.

All kinds of kitchen tools were neatly organized on the counter, and a camera was installed on top.

“How do you like it? If there’s anything you don’t like, I can change it.”

Guksun blinked back tears in her moist eyes.

“Did Yena and Abeom prepare all this?”

“…Yes.”

Of course, Jeong-oh had done most of the setup, but since he had repeatedly cautioned her not to disclose that, Guksun had to keep the truth hidden.

“Mother, and this is our apron.”

Before Guksun could ask anything else, Jiheon handed her an apron and put one on himself. It was a couple’s apron, just like at home.

“Today, I’ll be your assistant.”

Guksun stood there, unable to say or react to anything. She had never received such a grand gift in her life. Since this was just a hobby for her, such a gift felt overwhelmingly extravagant, and she couldn’t refuse it after it had already been prepared.

She also knew that her son-in-law would accept any gift she gave him without feeling burdened. So she understood he wanted her to accept it without feeling pressured.

She realized that if she accepted it joyfully, it would make him happy.

“Ah… what should I make… what would be good?”

Wiping her tears away, Guksun stood in front of the preparation counter. Meanwhile, Jiheon adjusted the camera angle.

Thinking about what dish to make, Guksun looked around once more. After carefully observing the arrangement of the kitchen tools and the décor, she was certain.

This was all done by our daughter.

She had often seen her daughter lost in thought while looking at something on her phone. She had worried that something was bothering her, but her daughter had been setting up this workspace.

Our daughter must have known all along but pretended not to notice, waiting until I told her directly.

Realizing the truth choked her up.

“Does our son-in-law like yakbap?”

“Of course. He loves it.”

“Then how about we make that?”

She wanted to make the yakbap that her family loved and bring it home.

After donning her apron and washing her hands, Guksun cleared her throat and began filming.

“Today, our son-in-law is going to assist me.”

“Hello, I’m son-in-law Jeong-seobang.”

“Isn’t our son-in-law’s voice nice? In person, he looks even better. I want to brag about his looks, but let’s respect his privacy.”

Perhaps she was naturally suited for filming; once the recording started, Guksun felt relaxed and excited. The two of them usually worked well together, so the filming went smoothly without any difficulty.

“I’ll handle the editing. I know I’ll need to improve, but I’ll study to do it skillfully.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

Although Jiheon offered to take care of the editing, Guksun refused.

“Learning how to do this is fun. I’ll give it a try while asking about anything I don’t know. Thank you.”

The two of them packed the yakbap they made together and headed home.

Once home, Guksun revealed everything to Jeong-oh about what had happened. Jeong-oh looked genuinely surprised, as if she had just discovered her mother’s secret today, but her act seemed a bit clumsy.

Guksun couldn’t help but laugh at her daughter’s poor acting skills.

“You decorated the kitchen, didn’t you?”

“Did you notice?”

“I’m your mom, so how could I not notice that?”

Jeong-oh smiled awkwardly.

“I’m sorry for pretending not to know.”

“I’m more sorry for keeping it a secret all this time.”

“…….”

“Thank you. Thank you to both you and Jiheon. I’m so grateful.”

And once again, a peace without secrets returned.

“Mom, even if you become famous, you have to live with me. Do you understand?”

Jeong-oh clung to Guksun’s arm, acting cute.

When Guksun didn’t respond right away, Jeong-oh complained, as if getting anxious.

“Answer quickly! Are you going to live with me or not?”

“Where else would I go?”

Hehe.

You will be with me forever.

Always Guksun’s little baby, Jeong-oh held onto her mother’s arm for a long time, rubbing her face against it as if she were Yena.

In the meantime, Guksun’s phone vibrated. It was a text message from her cooking academy colleague.

– Guksun! I saw the video you uploaded! Did your son-in-law help you? Why does your son-in-law’s voice sound so good? It’s totally amazing!!

Ch183 - [Epilogue] Realization (Complete)

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‘The shampoo is running low.’

Jeong-oh picked up the discarded clothes and put them back on.

It was annoying, but there was no other choice. On her way to grab the new shampoo from the utility room, Jiheon was there. Knowing that he wouldn’t just stay still if she wandered around without clothes, she couldn’t even ask him to bring her the shampoo.

As she opened the bathroom door and moved quickly, she ran into Jiheon. His gaze seemed intense, but Jeong-oh ignored it and rushed past him.

Fortunately, he didn’t try to stop her.

“Phew.”

A sigh of relief escaped Jeong-oh’s lips as she returned to the bathroom. She didn’t understand why she felt this way. They were a couple, and at times, she could have made him flustered. So why did she still feel tense around him? Why this sense of relief?

After washing up, Jeong-oh dried her hair, got dressed, and headed to the living room.

“Is Ye-jun still not awake?”

“Yeah.”

Jiheon, answering Jeong-oh's question, narrowed his eyes and looked at her sharply. Wondering what the problem was, Jeong-oh spoke again.

"What's wrong?"

With a displeased expression, Jiheon poked a finger through a hole in Jeong-oh's shoulder area of her shirt.

"Your clothes are too revealing."

Jeong-oh's eyes narrowed at Jiheon's comment.

It wasn't even off-the-shoulder; it was just a small hole as a design detail on her shoulder—no bigger than 15 cm in diameter.

"How is this revealing? Did you just step out of the Joseon Dynasty?"

"You can see skin that wasn't visible before."

"Whether you see it or not, no one else is looking but you, you idiot."

A jolt.

Suddenly, Jiheon's expression changed. Jeong-oh belatedly bit her lips to hide her smile, but it was no use. With a faint, seductive smile, Jiheon stepped closer, intertwining his fingers with hers to push her hands away and covered her lips with his.

In the confusion of not knowing what had gone wrong at that moment, Jeong-oh felt Jiheon's warm breath invade her.

Why did I go through the trouble of picking up clothes in the bathroom? Jeong-oh regretted it for a moment.

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Jiheon and Jeong-oh took Ye-jun to the pediatrician. It was the day for Ye-jun's vaccinations.

The pediatrician, seeing many babies of the same age, was impressed by Ye-jun's remarkable growth.

"Wow, this baby is big! He must be in the top 10% for his age."

"Yeah, he was born big—4 kg right from the start."

"Oh my, you must have had a hard time, Mom."

As Jiheon listened to the conversation between the doctor and Jeong-oh, he became solemn. He realized he needed to pay more attention to parenting, but then the needle approached. Reflexively, he tightened his grip on the baby and huddled his shoulders.

"Anyone would think the dad is the one getting the shot," the doctor teased Jiheon, who straightened his shoulders in response. However, he flinched when the needle pierced the baby's skin, as if it had gone into his own.

Waaaaah!

Ye-jun, wide-eyed in the new environment, burst into tears and squirmed.

"Where did he get such a loud voice from?"

The experienced doctor chuckled as he put a band-aid on the baby's arm.

"You can take the band-aid off in 30 minutes. No baths today, as there might be a slight fever, but if it gets serious, come back in."

"Okay. Thank you."

As they left the examination room, Jeong-oh secretly smiled at Jiheon, who was trying to soothe the crying baby while bowing politely to the nurse.

He clearly looked like a first-time dad, but he had insisted on taking them to the hospital today.

Still, it was comfortable and reassuring to be with her husband. Jiheon tended to take on all the difficult tasks when they were together, so today,

Jeong-oh didn’t have to lift a finger.

After finally calming Ye-jun down and securing him in the car seat, Jeong-oh turned to Jiheon, who was wiping the sweat off his forehead.

“Was it two years ago or three years ago? I took Ye-na for her flu shot.”

As Jiheon was about to start the engine, he turned to look at Jeong-oh.

“When the kids went into the exam room, they all came out crying, and of course, Ye-na was scared. I had to convince her that it was necessary, telling her that I’d get the shot too, so we should go in together.”

This was a story about a precious memory he didn’t know about.

“Here’s the problem. Should the mom get the shot first, or should the kid?”

“The mom should go first so she can set an example, right?”

“No. If the mom goes first and the kid is squirming, she won’t be able to hold onto them properly. The kid should go first.”

But that answer was based on the mother’s perspective. If it were Jiheon, he could have gotten the shot first and still easily held onto the baby.

Thinking his wife would dispute his answer, Jiheon simply nodded quietly.

“Anyway, Ye-na went first. Overwhelmed with fear, she naturally cried. While trying to comfort her, I said, ‘Ye-na, you shouldn’t cry like that. Look at mommy. Mommy isn’t hurt. Mommy isn’t crying.’ I tried to set a good example for her. But do you know what Ye-na said as she clung to me?”

“…….”

“Mom! No! Don’t get the shot! It really hurts! Mommy, don’t get the shot!”

She remembered the heartfelt moment from that day. It was a love that she hadn’t explicitly taught her child, yet somehow the child had come to understand love. And so, the child had brought happiness to her mother.

She hadn’t shared everything about this lovely child with her husband. While she told him about precious memories as they came to mind, most of her memories with the child were so ordinary that they inevitably faded over time.

Jiheon also seemed a bit disappointed, his eyes shining with excitement as he listened, only to pout afterward.

“Why are you only telling me this now? You should have shared such important stories right from the start.”

“I’m only remembering it now, so I’m sharing it now.”

“Don’t you remember enough?”

“Jiheon, if you pout over things like this, I won’t share these stories with you in the future.”

“Since precious memories have come back, I think we should have a celebration party, honey.”

As Jeong-oh became firm in her stance, Jiheon quickly changed his attitude, which made Jeong-oh stifle a laugh.

Time, memories, and even we ourselves keep flowing, and while it’s inevitable to let go of everyday memories, Jiheon, now you too will begin to build your own special memories.

“Please drop me off over there. I’ll take my time pushing the stroller.”

“Why? I’ll take you home.”

“No, you need to get back to work quickly.”

“Do you want to rush me out of the house that badly?”

“You have a lot to do.”

He didn’t respond to the inconvenient truth.

He went flying yoga with Ye-na once a week, assisted Guksun, and when spending time with family, he was so diligent and passionate, but still had complaints about work.

Jeong-oh had taken a leave of absence, which made it even more so. He didn't want to go to work because he had nothing to keep him there.

However, Jiheon's abilities and drive continued to receive good reviews. Not long ago, he established a content production subsidiary under Max Planning. He hired video creators with growth potential to create promotional content for clients' products.

In an era where TV ratings had dropped compared to before and interactive media were gaining prominence, Jiheon's strategy had paid off.

Storytelling content that broke free from the limits of 15-second and 30-second formats had garnered much love from the public. Just a month after starting the new business, orders from clients who appreciated the company began to pour in.

In truth, this was largely due to the influence of Lee Guksun. Jiheon had drawn inspiration for his business from Guksun, who had become a popular creator with 10,000 subscribers, so Jeong-oh couldn't press her husband too hard. The home was a source of rest, energy, and inspiration for him.

Eventually, Jeong-oh gave in to her husband's stubborn insistence that he had nothing to do until his afternoon meeting.

But when they got home, Jiheon called out urgently while watching Ye-jun as Jeong-oh was changing clothes.

"Honey! Honey!"

"What! What!"

Jeong-oh rushed over, thinking something serious had happened, hastily putting on her clothes.

"What's going on?!"

“Ye-jun flipped over!”

“…….”

“I’m serious!”

“Oh, really?”

“Want me to show you again?”

“I’ll change and come back to see.”

Jeong-oh had been thinking for days that Ye-jun would soon flip over, so she wasn’t particularly surprised. Instead, she found Jiheon’s reaction amusing.

I felt the same way back then. I didn’t know.

“It’s just the beginning, Oppa.”

“Hmm?”

“Flipping over is just the start.”

“What’s the start?”

“You’ll understand once you experience it.”

Jeong-oh chuckled and turned away.

Jiheon realized the meaning behind Jeong-oh’s words less than an hour later.

“Ye-jun! Ye-jun! Jeong Ye-jun!”

At Jiheon’s shout, Jeong-oh, who had been dozing on the sofa, rushed over again.

“What! What’s wrong? Why! Why!”

“Hey! You little rascal! Didn’t I tell you to stay still?!”

Jeong-oh’s eyes clouded over at Jiheon’s angry voice as he held onto Ye-jun. The baby’s forehead turned red like a salmon fillet, as if pleading, “Dad, don’t be angry. I look just like you.”

“Are you disciplining a baby who isn’t even a year old?”

“No, he’s trying to flip over while I’m changing his diaper.”

Jeong-oh chuckled as she approached and grabbed Ye-jun’s arms. With his limbs flailing, Ye-jun burst into tears as he felt restrained. Jeong-oh changed her expression to get Ye-jun’s attention, and with her help, Jiheon was able to change the diaper without issue.

“Was Ye-na like this too?”

“Everyone is.”

“…….”

“Raising a child isn’t all about happiness, you know.”

“…….”

“Once they start to pull themselves up, you have to immediately clear away anything dangerous in the house, and you have to watch to make sure they don’t put strange things in their mouths.”

“Can’t you just use a walker?”

“That’s only temporary. Kids are so crafty. They’ll quickly get out of the walker and try to crawl somewhere upside down.”

Imagining Ye-jun getting stuck somewhere after escaping the walker left Jiheon’s expression dazed.

“Don’t worry. They’re still cute. You don’t know how beautiful they are.”

Jeong-oh comforted Jiheon like that.

No, it wasn’t comfort.

Jeong-oh knew that no matter what trouble the kids caused, Jiheon would only feel happiness. Just as he had for the past year or so they had been together.

“It’s been almost a year since you regained your memory, Oppa.”

Before long, his birthday was approaching. Jiheon nodded as he counted the days.

“What have you realized during the seven years you lost your memory?”

“Life without desire is boring.”

The answer shot out without a second of hesitation.

The affectionate and gentle gaze he had directed at the baby briefly turned sultry when it landed on her, sending a chill down her spine.

…Can’t be helped.

But it was so like Jeong Jiheon.

It wasn’t the heartfelt answer she had hoped for, but Jeong-oh couldn’t help but laugh.

It was because of this unchanging man that she had fallen so deeply for him.

It was because of him that she had been found once again.

Even in the moments he couldn’t see, he had always lived in her mind.

The one who would always be by her side from now on. The one she would live with.

If there is an afterlife, she felt certain he would find her again in that life too.

Jeong-oh tightly wrapped her arms around her husband’s waist.

End of the Side Story.

by BaaRaam